

MONSIEUR

George Challis

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The Splendid Rascal




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I

IT IS the misfortune of most that when they begin their memoirs they are forced to write down many first recollections which have nothing to do with all the long tenor of the lives which followed; but the first thing that I can remember was the weird singing from the Limousin River as the *coureurs des bois* spun down the current with rhythmic dippings of their paddles. Once, when I heard that song from the heart of the night, I left my bed and went to the window. Through a cleft among the big evergreens that stood between our house and the water, I saw two long canoes, each manned by four paddlers, shoot like strange shadows across the moon-silvered river. They were racing for the town, and I knew that the odd mounds of blackness in the center of each canoe were precious furs brought out of the great cold wilderness which ex-

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tended north and west, north and west to the end of the world!

This is my first memory. The second is still more vivid. I was only five years old, but that event stands among the shadows of my childhood like a bright Italian painting in a dim room. It was a white still day, so cold that my nurse said even the wind dared not stir. My mother was afraid to trust me to such weather, but my father laughed at her, saying: "He is not a toy; he is a man!"

"Alas, alas!" said my poor mother, "is he a man so soon?"

But she gave up at once, as she always did, and my father in person hustled me out of the house and told the nurse not to treat me as though I would break; because I was a Limousin, and men of that name should be tough fellows.

There had been a soft thick fall of snow the day before, and the still air left every branch piled deep with it, except the more supple ones that had bent under the weight and slipped it off. Some of those branches were still bending slowly as the hour hand of a clock turns down, so that now and again in the dark of the forest there was a flashing phan-

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tom and then the sound of powdered snow striking the earth like the great wing of a moth.

So cold, and yet the sun was bright! His brilliance, I think, made the chill of the air seem yet more biting; one's hand grew numb the instant a glove was stripped off. We looked continually into the face of each other to see if the white patch was appearing on cheek or nose.

Under the glorious shining of the sun, the world seemed to be carved of one entire moonstone; then I remember that we walked in sudden dimness as a high wind, unfelt on the earth, rolled thick sheets and deep pillars of cloud across the sky.

I found a pool in the midst of a clearing, frozen to the bottom; it had congealed when the air was entirely still, so that it was a solid bowl of glass. I could count the pebbles on the bottom—I could trace every vein in the leaves of the water plants. My nurse—her face is a blank to me, so that I see her now with a white mist instead of features—had gone off to see if she had not noted a squirrel that had ventured out in spite of this Arctic weather to look at the sun and let the sun look at him. I found myself alone by that crystal pool in a tall avenue of

hemlocks, when I felt something behind me and was afraid to turn around.

It was a sense of fear and evil as sharp as the picture of an old hag in a fairy-tale. At least, I was sure that there were eyes bearing upon me, and though I could not hear a sound, yet I knew that the eyes were drawing closer to me. So, in a sudden frenzy, I whirled around.

It was a tall young man with the ugliest face that the sun ever looked upon—a long lean face, purple with cold. Poverty makes mere ugliness terrible. This man was clad in rags. He tried to smile at me—reassuringly, I suppose—and I thought that the lips would twist and break with the effort. It was like the grimace of an ogre.

I shrieked and ran as fast as I could, straight past him. Once he was behind me, I felt that he was pursuing; but yonder I saw my nurse hurrying toward me.

What followed, or what she said to the strange young man, I can not recall. The remainder of that day is lost in a haze, which is strange. For one would think that what followed such a shock would be remembered, and not what went before.

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However, my adventure of the forest remained in my mind and the results of it dropped out of my thoughts until the following spring. It was the time of the first flowers, though there was still snow beneath the trees, sometimes heaped up in dirty mounds around the trunks. In the shadows of the forest, too, there was still a freezing ghost of winter; but in the open the meadows were beginning to stir with life. The trees were still wretched-looking, starved black things, some with their bodies split open by the frost, but through the meadows spring was already spilled about our feet.

Oh, that first flush of spring in the snow-bound North! How the blood leaps and the heart sings at the sight of it! The air is filled with magic; every one is happy; there is nothing but smiling, and voices are musically gay.

The season had so worked upon my father—I can attribute it to nothing else—that he declared he in person would overlook my first riding lesson. Before this he never had favored me with ten consecutive words, and this made the day one of the great ones of my life. Riding clothes had been made to fit my small self. A pony had been bought,

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guaranteed for perfect temper and gentle gaits, then we sallied out for the stables. What I first saw was a glistening black charger, who danced upon the air and tossed his head until the mane blew like smoke above him. I was afraid that I was to be put on the back of this winged monster, but my father laughed at me and told me that this was his horse. He pointed out a dainty-limbed little creature with an eye as mild as the eye of a woman, and told me that was to be my mount.

The head groom himself put me up with a toss and a laugh, but as he was fitting my feet into the stirrups I had my first sight of him who held the pony's head. It was the hideous face of my man of the forest. I lost my balance, and with a screech tumbled backward out of the little saddle.

I rolled to my feet and bolted for the house as fast as I could run, but thunder roared behind me, and then I was snatched up into the heart of the sky.

I was sitting on the pommel in front of my father. He was in a fury.

"Are you a Limousin? Are you my son? A fool and a coward," he said to me through his tight lips. "You dared scream when the pony had not

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stirred? You dared to squeal out like a girl?"

"It is the forest man!" I sobbed to him. "It is the forest man!" And I pointed to the ugly face of the new groom.

What with the shock of that unexpected vision and the overwhelming rage of my father, I passed into a semi-hysteria and could only wail out, again and again: "It is the forest man!" while my father grew more and more beside himself with rage.

Finally he dragged me back and said to the head groom, "Who is this man?"

"It is Pierre Reynal," said the groom:

"Has he been with you long?"

"For three months, Monsieur."

"His character?"

The head groom looked about him rather wildly for a moment and then found his superlative.

"I have given the keeping of Monsieur's own horses into his hands!"

It was enough. My father looked on Pierre Reynal, who had his cap in his hand, in a very kindly manner.

"You have changed the manners of this black devil, Pierre," said he.

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"We get on very well together, he and I," said Pierre Reynal.

And he smiled; and I shuddered, remembering that smile and seeing it again. He was the only man I ever knew who grew more hideous by smiling.

"What is wrong with my son?" asked my father.

"Ah, Monsieur, would to God that I knew!"

With this my father threw me across his arm, strode into the house, and literally cast me down at the feet of my terrified mother.

"You have given me a son like yourself!" he thundered at her. "He is a fool and a coward—a fool and a coward—like you, Julie!"

By this time I was screaming again; and my father with a cry, rushed out of the room, his hands clapped over his ears.

II

YOU will wonder how a servant could have been on the place for three long months unknown to my mother or to me—or to my father, for that matter; but the château, as most people called it, was so large that even Monsieur could not know details. Besides, it was his habit to trust an absolute authority to the hands of the chiefs of his staff, while he demanded from them, in return, an absolute accounting at whatever instant his whim desired one. The chief woodman, for instance, could thin the forest at his own discretion; but woe to him if he selected the wrong tree, or one which was essential to the beauty of the estate. The stable master, in the same manner, was unchecked tyrant over the entire force of grooms. He could hire and discharge, raise wages, buy hay and oats at whatever price he chose to pay. But the frightful responsibility of keeping the horses fit for the in-

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spection of Monsieur Limousin turned his hair white ten years before his time.

"All truly great generals," Monsieur was fond of saying, "knew the man to trust and trusted him. The glorious Bonaparte surrounded himself with men who were like hands to him, and brains!"

The great Napoleon was my father's god. He began his mature life with a handsome estate and the nucleus of the château already built near that river which men were beginning to call the Limousin in compliment to my family. From a modest holding he stretched it into a small province, with truly Napoleonic methods. If he wanted the lands of a neighbor, Monsieur ruined him first; he emptied the pockets of his victim, for instance, by a swift movement in the stock market, and when the poor fellow was financially wrecked, my father bought in the estate for a song. So he grew. He was hated at first, but afterward he was admired; the difference between sharp practise and good business often lies only in the size of the transaction.

Like the hero he admired, he was magnificent in all his ways. Because the road to the château wound through a wretched little village two miles

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from the house, he tore that town to the ground and rebuilt it substantially with hewn stone. An excellent architect designed the quaint Old-World houses ; an excellent landscape artist designed the park with which he beautified the village. When all was ended, the villagers found that they were living in heaven, and that the expense of the change had been borne by a man who asked for no return.

Generosity on such a scale was divine. My father went further.

"It is necessary," I have heard him say many times, "that a strong man be either hated or worshiped. Or both!"

He established a bank in the town. Through a capable officer of the bank he extended loans to the most provident citizens, until in the course of a very little time the lives of the entire body of people lay in his hands. With a gesture, he could exalt the lowest to the side of the highest ; with a nod he could tumble the loftiest man in the village into the dust.

"How frightfully it must cost you!" cried my simple mother to him one day.

"Silly child," said he. "They are my subjects ;

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I am the king, and the interest they pay to me is the taxation I levy on them."

The whole venture, as a matter of fact, he turned from a striking bit of philanthropy into the soundest of good business, but the villagers could never see the truth behind the golden mist of his generosity. If, here and there, one of their town-folk disappeared from their midst and removed to a distant part of the land, it was never suspected that the strong and secret hand of Monsieur Limousin was weeding out the indigent and putting in their places diligent workers who would pay fatter rates of interest to his bank. And, in a very short time, the countryside worshiped him. His tenant farmers and his hired laborers were the chosen stock of the countryside and the whole district looked toward the lofty walls of the château as toward a heavenly palace from which peace and good will flowed forth over the world!

It is said that no man is a hero to his valet, but I doubt if a single one of Monsieur Limousin's domestics ever looked behind the veil into the truth of my father. Far be it even from me to pretend to pierce to his heart, to praise or to damn; I put

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down only what my eyes saw and my ears heard, in the hope that you who read may be helped by what I say to build out of your own minds a picture of a man whose vices and whose virtues were like himself—great.

My half-brother, Hubert Guillaume Limousin, resembled my father; he was tall, rugged, powerful even in his sixteenth year, and he had a handsome dark face like the portrait of Monsieur Limousin's first wife which hung in the library opposite my father's chair and above the fireplace. I have heard that even her fiery heart was broken by him, at last, but however he may have regarded her during her life, it is certain that after her death he loved her and loved the image of her in her son. Hubert was the only person who dared to stand face to face with Monsieur Limousin; he alone could pretend to read the mind of my father because they were so much alike in furious temper, at least, and in physical strength.

To Hubert my mother sent on this day of days, and asked him why my father was in such a fury. He had his hat in one hand, a supple riding whip in the other, and as he looked on me from the height

of his years and his strength, I feared and worshiped him as my mother feared and worshiped Monsieur Limousin.

"I'm sure I can not tell," said Hubert, "unless it's because Jean is such a frightful little sniveler. Look at him now!"

For I was still blubbering.

After Hubert left the room, my mother drew from me the whole story by patient degrees, and at last she went with me to see the new groom for herself. We did not go near the stables, for while we were still at a distance she stopped with a little shiver and cried softly to me: "That is the man. Jean?"

"It is he!" said I, for Pierre Reynal was about to take out a horse for exercise.

"Ah, then I understand!" she breathed. And she took me hurrying back to the house, murmuring: "Why could not François understand, also?"

You will see by this, perhaps, that there was sympathy between my mother and me of flesh to flesh and soul to soul. She had given me her own frail body, her golden hair, her blue eyes, her delicate pretty face which I so often groaned against

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as I stood before the mirror yearning with a broken heart for the stalwart shoulders and the dark stern features of a true Limousin. With the body, she gave me something of the same spirit, also. Shall I tell you that I knew the shadow in her mind while she was still smiling; or that before I wakened at night from an evil dream she was already beside my bed?

She waited until the next day, so that the temper of Monsieur might soften a little, but much as she dreaded him, she could not help raising her voice on my behalf; so on the next morning she said to him:

“I went to see Pierre Reynal and I could not help shuddering at his frightful face; François, you must forgive poor little Jean!”

At this, he knit his fingers in his beard and stared at her.

“Pierre Reynal is a flawless horseman,” was all he said. Then he added, still watching her: “I find that he is a fellow of education, too. I am considering promoting him to a better place in the household!”

And he did! Now, as I consider it, I try to

tell myself that he could not have done it merely to torture his wife and his younger son. I try to tell myself that Monsieur had found an opportunity to look into the mind of this new groom at the stables; that he had seen something extraordinary in Pierre Reynal.

However, I must end explanations and come to the thing itself. A few days later the secretary who kept the correspondence and prepared the letters of Monsieur Limousin was discharged. Still another week went by, and then of an evening when I was in the library to say good night to my mother and my father—Hubert was then away at school—Monsieur touched a bell and presently there advanced into the room a tall man dressed in black with his throat muffled in an old-fashioned black stock. He came slowly into the light, so that I saw all of these funereal details before I noticed the face itself, and then I grew giddy and weak. My mother caught me quickly to her, for in the clothes of a gentleman there was my wild man of the forest, the late groom of the stables, the pale hideous face of Pierre Reynal!

I heard the heavy breathing of my father as

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though he drank in the picture with a savage satisfaction. Then his voice lifted me to my feet.

“Stand up to meet the gentleman, Jean! And—my dear, I wish you to know my new secretary, who is to be one of us and try to keep my very tangled affairs in a better order. This is Monsieur Pierre Reynal!”

I can remember, as distinctly as I recall the terror with which I went forward to give my hand to the stranger, that the forehead of the monster was glistening with perspiration; and by that I judged that the moment was as grim a trial to him as it was to us.

However, from that moment Pierre Reynal was a member of the family.

III

IF IT be true that Monsieur brought Reynal into the house only to plague my poor mother and myself, it is perhaps equally true that at the end of a few days he was convinced that Pierre Reynal was a treasure in his new post. Monsieur found the greatest pleasure in pointing out to us the excellent qualities of his new secretary. He would say: "Consider his soft step, his grave manner; are they not the qualities of a gentleman?"

At this I remember that my mother broke into one of her little flurries.

"François, François! You know that he has the step of a cat and the manner of an owl. I am afraid of him; my very bones thrill at him!"

To this Monsieur answered, with a smile that showed his youthful white teeth:

"You have a charming imagination, my dear. You might have been a poet, if you had been born to wear trousers. However, I say that I see in

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Pierre Reynal the making of a gentleman. He is what I have pronounced him. In addition, he is never officious, never forward, never boisterous. He remains in the house quiet as a shadow."

"He is a shadow, indeed!" sighed my mother.

"For the rest, I discover new accomplishments in him every day. In the open, he is a master horseman. Within doors, he is the most efficient accountant, the most reliable memory, the most careful and exact secretary that I have ever enjoyed! Why should you not welcome him as a gentleman?"

But though he insisted that Pierre Reynal be received as a gentleman, his own treatment of his secretary was that which one would give to a highly trained dog. He was fond of drawing out Reynal in this manner:

"You speak an excellent French, Pierre. It has a Parisian quality that is rare in this barbarous northland. And your English is very good; not like the French, but very good. Have you any other languages?"

"A morsel of Italian, Monsieur."

"Italian also? Italian also? You are a man of many tongues. A three-tongued man, Pierre Rey-

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nal; more accomplished than a snake by half, at least!"

Monsieur was very fond of his own jokes, and here he broke into the heartiest laughter, rocking back and forth in his big chair until even its sturdy frame groaned with the bulk of him. These laughers always ended in a prolonged chuckling, during which Monsieur combed his heavy curling beard with his fingers.

By such bits of dialogue as this I came to know that Monsieur in reality looked down upon the man just as much as my mother did, but without the same horror, of course; so that I once asked her why he kept Pierre Reynal in the house. She took my face between her hands; to see her so grave and so sad was like watching a garden under shadow.

"God will not let me tell you," said she, "and I pray that you never come to know!"

"But Pierre Reynal, why does he stay when he is treated so by my father?" I asked. "Because he is very proud."

"The devil is known for his pride," said my mother.

After that she would talk no more, but hurried

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me off to bed. I lay awake for a time, fearing the dark, but when I closed my eyes, the terrible face of Reynal formed in the blackness and grinned at me; until at length I was tired of terror itself and fell asleep.

I was awakened by the cold hand of the moon upon my face. The great French door that opened on the balcony was white with it, worked across by the regular shadow of a climbing vine, like graceful stone tracery; but between me and the door was the form of a man with a long, oval head—the head of Pierre Reynal! Yes, he was kneeling by my bed, leaning over me. When I drew my breath, he was up and away; before my scream began he was gliding through the door and across the balcony.

When my mother came flying to me and I gasped out the story, she picked me up in her arms with the moan of a tortured dove, and anger gave her strength to carry me lightly into her own room and through it to the chamber of Monsieur. Apparently my shriek had reached even to his ear, for we found him standing in a red dressing-robe, combing his black beard.

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"My Jean was waked out of his sleep by your pet demon, Reynal, leaning over his bed. Look at his face! Look at his face, François! You are killing him!"

At this, Monsieur uttered a little exclamation and strode across the room, making chair and table and lamp quiver with the weight of his step.

"Are you armed, François?" cried my mother, but Monsieur was gone, and my mother sat down on the edge of his bed to soothe the fear out of me. He came back in a moment, smiling with anger.

"Reynal was in his bed, fast asleep," said he. "His door on the balcony is locked and the key is lost. Now take the brat away and never mention his cowardly dreams to me again!"

She carried me back to my bed and stayed with me.

"But you," I whispered to her, "you believe me? It was not a dream?"

"Hush, dear," said she. "Oh, we are lost, we are lost!"

That frightened little whisper of hers was like the sigh of a ghost and it filled me with so much dread that I fell asleep under the black weight of

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it, feeling that Pierre Reynal would never leave the Château Limousin until both my mother and I were dead.

But aside from that strange incursion into my room that night, I can not say that the actions of Reynal were ever unusual or ominous in any way; except that he had an odd habit of taking long walks by himself. Usually he left the house just before dusk and often he did not return until after dinner. When he came in, we would see his pale face flushed or his eye lighted. It was while Reynal was off on one of these woodland rambles through the dark, that I came into the library, according to the rule, to say good night. At the same moment, my father leaned his head to the side and then stood up and hastily unlocked and opened the door which led from the library into the garden. A dank breath of night and mist blew into the room. Then, from the far horizon of blackness, we heard the cry of a timber wolf.

"Julie," said Monsieur, "is not this the month of the werewolf?"

I turned a wild eye on my mother and found her with her hands clasped, and her face white; of

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course, the same hideous thought had been born at the same instant in both our minds. Monsieur shut the door, and as he turned to us he was smiling. Can it be that he knew how his casual words sank into our hearts? I can not believe it; I have not dared believe it.

You must not think that these things happened in quick succession, as they appear in this writing, for they were scattered through much time; only, looking back on those days from this distance, I give the peaks and summits of our quiet life, and omit many long valleys that lie between the hills. I had come now, to my ninth year, and my mother decided that something must be done to take me from the château, for I had begun to fear my own shadow, I could not sleep without a light in the room, I dared not walk in the woods alone, I would not even paddle a canoe close to the dark margin of the lake where the trees overhung it.

She went to Monsieur, therefore, and declared that I had reached an age when, because I read and thought past my years, she no longer could teach me as I should be taught, and she felt that I should be sent away to a school, as my brother Hubert

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Guillaume had been sent before me. But Monsieur laughed the thought away. He took hold of my upper arm; his thumb and forefinger overlapped it.

“Send him away?” said he. “Nonsense, Julie! Look at him, my dear, and then suggest it again. He is as light as a puff of smoke. The first cold wind of public opinion would dissolve him. The first schoolboy prank would drive him into hysteria and a madhouse. Send him away? No, he must be kept at home where you will continue to coddle and keep his soul and his body united. As for the teaching, we will bring home a tutor to attend to that!”

When he spoke in such a tone, she never could answer him; but it was like a death-blow to both of us. A tutor meant that we would have less time together; and if I lived by her, she, I think, lived no less by me. We wept together under the stroke that had fallen, but neither of us thought of appeal, far less of revolt. So it was that d’Argenteau came into the house.

He was past forty, with a withered handsome face, and the habitual sneer of a clever man who had failed in the world. As for his qualifications,

my father announced them to d'Argenteau in their first interview in his usual loud voice, so that I heard every word as I sat in the next room. Monsieur was a man who believed in saying what he had to say so that every one could hear him. He had not the slightest care whether or not his sentiments would be approved by his servants—or his family.

He said to Bertran d'Argenteau: "You are here, Monsieur d'Argenteau, because of two qualities which you possess. The first and less important reason is that you are a man of education, familiar with the ways of the world, and capable of polite manners and conversation. The second and more important reason is that you come of an ancient name and your blood is blue. It is on account of the second reason that I am paying you a salary which is probably twice the worth which ordinary people would find in you. You will understand, Monsieur d'Argenteau, that you are about to undertake the instruction of a son of the house of Limousin, and that the blood of the Bourbons flows in the veins of that boy. There is another point which you must comprehend from the beginning.

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In this house there is only one master and the rest of the household serve his will. Needless to say, I am that master."

A few moments afterward d'Argenteau came in to me, and I knew by his icy smile that he had submitted to the tyrant but that he would make me suffer for his submission.

IV

THERE were a pair of excellent reasons for the hatred which d'Argenteau felt for me. On the one hand, the sternness of Monsieur filled my tutor with malice; on the other hand, I was one of those unattractive boys who melt into tears at the least provocation. That is a weakness which is irritating in girls, but is both bewildering and disgusting in boys. Mathematics were as mysterious as a ghost language to me and my very first lesson in that science brought a tirade from d'Argenteau that sent me with my tears and my troubles to my mother. She came to the schoolroom and spoke calmly but severely to the tutor, when d'Argenteau astonished us by announcing that my education was entirely in his hands and that he was to receive advice from only one person in the house.

It was true. My father gave me entirely into the hands of this waspish fellow, and during four hours every day he turned my life into a torment.

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However, I got on, for next to the face of Pierre Reynal and the frown of Monsieur, I dreaded the biting tongue of my tutor; and I learned that the only way to avoid its stings was to present perfect lessons. You will guess that the greatest praise I received from him was silence; yet we covered such ground that at the end of a month d'Argenteau could show my work to Monsieur with satisfaction.

This gave Monsieur one of those openings of which he never failed to take advantage.

"You see," said he to my mother, "that even you have not been able to ruin entirely the temper of the boy. There is still metal in him that responds to hammering!"

And he exchanged a smile with d'Argenteau while my mother hung her head and turned white.

D'Argenteau, in fact, grew daily in importance and began to push Pierre Reynal into the background. If Reynal interested Monsieur because of the peculiar influence which he exercised over my mother and me, d'Argenteau was still more worth while through his conversation which entertained my father. We never entertained people of our quality and, for reasons which you will be able to guess

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by this time, I suppose that Monsieur had not a friend in the world of his own social status. Instead he was surrounded entirely by the peasants and the villagers to whom he was a god, by the household in which he was a king among slaves, and at a greater distance by the hatred and the bitterness of all the world with which he came into contact through his business affairs. D'Argenteau was therefore the first man to sit at his table in years who was capable of narrating personal experiences worthy of the ear of Monsieur. Better than this, he was a perfect listener. His attitude was that of an equal, so that he was at ease to make himself into a critical audience; at the same time there was an exquisite consciousness on both sides that he was no more than a superior domestic.

In this manner d'Argenteau rose. Two fine horses were assigned to him; he was lodged in one of the most pleasant chambers on the south side of the château, overlooking the river; and here Monsieur occasionally condescended to go for a bottle of wine in the evening, and for a talk which was not meant for the ears of my mother.

It was at this point that Pierre Reynal, by an

odd stroke, completely overturned the domestic hierarchy and again put himself at the top of the pyramid.

It was a fall day. The trees were naked but the air was not yet bitterly cold, and a pleasant blue mist was dusted through the woodland. A new rifle had come for Monsieur and he was out early after breakfast to try the gun. He was so excited over it that every one was invited to watch. So we stood in a well-ordered semicircle. His skill was extraordinary, for he was not only a great hunter, but he practised constantly at a target. First he shot a bottle from the top of a post, then he shattered a little stone on the same spot. At that distance, the rock was hardly more than a twinkling point of light.

We applauded regularly, of course, with a perfect discipline; but Monsieur was in ecstasies over his weapon. He handed it to d'Argenteau and bade him note this and that perfection in the gun; but d'Argenteau showed by his very manner of holding the weapon that he knew nothing about it.

"*Diable!*" cried Monsieur. "When you are in the wilderness you must be barbarian, d'Argenteau.

This is not the Old World. Do you see that twisted old oak? Under that very tree, friend, the Hurons murdered one of my forefathers, his wife, and his three daughters—and ripped away their scalps. Was it not under that very tree, Julie? If you are to stay with us, you must learn by that example, d'Argenteau, for in this Canada of ours, and in the Château Limousin, one is either the scalper or the scalped."

Here he broke into a hearty laughter and walked back and forth combing his black beard with his fingers and shrugging his shoulders. He was like an actor on a stage, except that this actor knew the audience dared not hiss, and cared not for their applause. Next he began to wish for some more difficult target to test fully the merits of this straight-shooting rifle, and now Pierre Reynal made his suggestion.

"I have heard," said he, "of a pigeon tied by a leg and allowed to fly——"

The idea filled Monsieur with enthusiasm. He caused a pigeon to be fastened by one leg with a long cord. The poor thing flew straight up, was stopped with a jerk that tumbled it half the way

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to the ground again, regained its balance by a miracle of grace and slid away to the side until the cord stopped it again. In the midst of these lively maneuvers Monsieur took his aim with great care and fired—but though one or two feathers fluttered to the ground, the bird did not fall.

“However,” cried Monsieur, “I shall nail it this time!”

And he tipped the gun to his shoulder again.

“Hold, Monsieur Limousin!” said Pierre Reynal.

My father stared at him as though he had heard the voice of a madman, for I suppose the word called him back to the days of his childhood. Since then he had heard no peremptory voice. Pierre Reynal had stepped out a little from the semicircle of the spectators. “You must not shoot again at that bird, Monsieur,” said he with the same surprising air of authority.

“I must not? *I* must not?” said Monsieur, growing a little flushed.

“It is the rule,” said Reynal. “You have missed, and the pigeon can not lose its life. It has earned its freedom.”

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Monsieur hesitated, as though he balanced between a desire to slaughter and a wish to keep the rule of the game.

"Well," said he at last, "carry the pigeon back to the cote."

"Even that will not do," said Pierre Reynal. "It must be set free. Cut the string, man, and toss the pigeon into the air."

On the estate of Limousin men did not wait to be bidden twice. When an order was heard it was obeyed, and therefore the pigeon keeper did not pause to hear a confirmation from Monsieur. He seemed to take it for granted that if Pierre Reynal dared to speak at all, he must have authority behind him. Therefore, he cut the string, and the pigeon shot away over the barren tops of the trees and was lost in the autumn mist. I scarcely saw it go, even though my heart leaped with joy because of its escape; I was too busy studying the face of Monsieur. I recognized his savage flush.

"See!" said I to my mother—for I was standing at her side. "Now something will happen."

But who could read the mind of Monsieur? The affront which seemed so great, offered as it

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was to a tyrant, appeared to please him in another moment. He clapped his hand against the stock of the rifle and began to laugh.

"You are a stern task-master, Reynal," said he. "You are very harsh to me, Reynal. But now, by heaven, *you* shall shoot at the next bird; and if I were you, Reynal, I should try very hard to hit the mark!"

There was an apparent threat in the last remark, but Reynal, handling the rifle did not notice. The second pigeon was brought and tied.

"You will not be able to put any blame upon the rifle, Reynal," said Monsieur dryly. "Now let us see you shoot!"

The others thought it very wonderful. For my part, I had not the slightest doubt as to what would happen, for when the tall man with the hideous face picked up the gun it seemed to me that the pigeon was already fluttering on the ground. Neither had my mother any doubt. She was turning away before the gun spoke; but I looked back and saw the bird whirl in the air and then tumble to the ground. I heard the soft thump as it struck.

I expected a jealous transport in Monsieur, but

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he clapped Pierre Reynal upon the shoulder very jovially.

"Most wonderful of all!" cried he. "You have not had a weapon in your hands for how many years?"

"You are wrong, Monsieur. I use a gun every day."

"What? Am I deaf then?"

"Monsieur must understand that to practise with a weapon, one need not discharge it!"

Never had I seen my father so surprised or so impressed. He regarded Reynal anew from head to feet.

"I have misjudged you, my friend," he said at last. "But now that I understand you, I shall make up for these neglected years!"

V

YOU will have guessed by this time that Monsieur loved the sports of the field with a passionate love, and that he cared for men almost in proportion as they excelled in the field. His greatest regret, I think, had been that he had no companion for his hunting trips, but now there was Reynal. Before the sun set on that same day, the two were away for the forest and did not appear again at the house for a full forty-eight hours. When they came, Monsieur wore a serious face. His leather hunting coat was torn to ribbons upon one side, and there was a shallow cut across his forehead; also he limped. He never referred to the adventure; neither did Perre Reynal; but within the week a mysterious knowledge was spread over the estate. Every one knew that Monsieur had failed to bring down a charging moose and that he had been struck down by the monster and almost killed when the rifle of Reynal dropped the giant.

Why Monsieur should have failed to mention the thing, I can not tell. It was not vanity; his vanity did not appear in such matters. He was willing to expose his weakness and his failures in the belief that, when known, they merely served to accent the greatness of his real strength. I think he kept an expectation that Reynal would, some day, talk of the affair, but Reynal never did, and upon the reticence rather than upon the actual saving of his life, Monsieur based the great respect in which he held his secretary. If Reynal had been simply a groom in the beginning and grown into importance as a means of tormenting my mother and me, he had stepped finally inside the very mind of Monsieur.

We felt the effects of the new relationship the very next night. It was my tenth birthday, and in honor of the occasion, I supped with the family and afterward sat in the music-room to hear d'Argenteau sing. One of the airs was a lively waltz; and Monsieur began to clap his hands in rhythm with it.

"There is a dance!" cried he. "There is something to tickle your feet, Julie my dear. If I were a dancing man—but—here is one who will do for

you. Reynal, will you ask Madame Limousin to dance? D'Argenteau, play that thing again—with feeling, man—with feeling!”

He was laughing again, and his black eyes flashed as Reynal and my mother stood up.

“I may have this honor?” said Reynal, moving across the room and bowing before my mother.

“You may, sir,” said she in a dying voice, and straightway glided away with him.

She was almost fainting, yet instinct and the fear of Monsieur kept her feet in time; and this strange Reynal waltzed beautifully! It was like seeing an angel's grace in a demon, and never did the monster seem more repulsive to me than when he held my lovely mother in his arm and circled around the room like an eagle with a white dove in its talons. As for what went on in the mind of Reynal, no one could guess, because a round white scar in the center of his right cheek had puckered all the flesh on that side of his face and drew his mouth into an habitual frightful grin—which a real smile made more devilish than ever.

When the tune ended, Monsieur insisted that they dance again. He seemed to enjoy it as much

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as a connoisseur at the opera, leaning far back in his chair and waving one hand in time—a graceful hand that marked every change and undulation of the music by a difference in its gesture.

When the next piece ended, my mother had to leave the room, and I went with her as a matter of course. The door was scarcely closed behind her when she told me to support her. I led her to an open window where the cold air revived her and then I led her up-stairs.

On the way, she kept repeating: “Did you hear, Jean? Did you hear, my poor boy?”

What she meant were the last words of Monsieur as we left the room: “My all-accomplished Pierre, is there anything among the graces of the world beyond the tips of your fingers? Is nothing past you? Then tell me, Pierre Reynal—will you take this girl-faced son of mine and guarantee to make a man of him? D’Argenteau shall supple his brain; you will make his soul strong.”

So my mother wept over me: “It is done, Jean! He has taken you from me at last.”

In the middle of the next afternoon, I was sent to Monsieur, and found him in his business room.

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Against the ancient darkness of the paneled walls, the florid face of Monsieur, his black beard and his shining eyes, looked like a seventeenth-century painting. By the window, tall and lithe as a Indian, his arms folded across his breast, was Pierre Reynal.

"From this day," said Monsieur in a solemn voice, "you are more the pupil of Reynal than of d'Argenteau."

He made a pause. Then he went on:

"When he speaks to you consider that it is my voice!"

Five minutes later Reynal and I were in the woods, he with his gliding step and my feet stuttering among the rocks and roots.

When we came to the bank of the river he said: "Take off your clothes and walk in!"

"I can not swim," said I.

He did not answer, and when I looked up to his face with its unending sneer, I made sure that he intended a simple end for me—death by drowning which would be imputed to accident. However, I could not resist. I took off my clothes and, standing trembling in the chilly air on the bank, I took a last look upon the world. It did not seem so

beautiful a place that one should weep at the leaving of it. A thought of my mother came in my mind, but before it should completely unnerve me, I stepped into the icy waters of the river. I walked to my knees, to my hips, to my breast, and there I heard the harsh voice of Reynal saying from the bank: "It is enough. Come back!"

Go back to him? No, the black river was far better—far better to feel one moment of choking and pain and then float down the current with the other driftage that flecked its surface. I cast myself forward, floundered for a moment with feet and hands, and then sank.

I saw beneath me the shadowy swirl of the currents; the dark-sliding arm of a branch floated above my head. It was not an agony. There was a struggling choking moment; I felt myself dying when a power caught me and jerked me up to light and air again.

By the time my senses had ceased swirling, Pierre Reynal had me back on the shore. With the edge of his hand he whipped the water from my body. Then he wrung the water from my hair, which my mother trimmed long. After that, he

bade me dress. My chief wonder was that he asked no questions, and that he stood so quietly at ease in his soaked clothes with the sharp wind blowing through him.

When I was dressed, he waved me before him.

"Run!" said he.

I ran with all my might, feeling that the devil was behind me, until I was blind and sick with exhaustion, and when I stopped and leaned against a tree, Pierre Reynal stood before me, hardly breathing.

"Is that all?" said he.

"That is all I can do!" said I.

"Ah, well," murmured Pierre Reynal, "it is not much, truly!

"Look at me," he added after another moment of thought. "I am drenched in cold water and the wind is sharp, but yet I am not in discomfort. Once my body was softer than yours; a doctor came to look at me every week and my mother pushed me outdoors in a wheel chair, because even walking exhausted me. Now you see me, do you not? You shall be changed also."

"Ah, Monsieur," said I, "I shall never be any

larger than a girl; I shall never be like Monsieur or Hubert Guillaume."

The face of Reynal withered. I could not tell whether it was pain or contempt.

"Is it the big ax which cuts down the tree most quickly? No, it is the steel of the truest temper; and in a man it is the truest temper also which we want. As for size — why, there is the ox. Would you wish to be a great steer or a slender race horse with a body like a bow of springing iron?"

So my first great hope came to me, not suddenly, but like a slow dawn; after that I could never despise myself so completely as I had done before.

He took me back to the house, but on the edge of the woods he paused again.

"Tell me, Monsieur Jean——" said he.

"Yes, Monsieur Reynal?" said I, still panting.

"Why do you hate me so?"

I felt that if I made such an admission, I should be lost indeed.

"No, no!" said I. "I do not hate you, Monsieur. I have a great fondness for you, Monsieur Reynal!"

"Can you look at me and say that?" said he.

I looked up into his face.

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“Monsieur,” said I, “I have a — a great —— ”

He began to smile; it made him more than ever like a death's-head; and I could not utter another syllable.

“Let us go on,” said he. And we went into the house.

This was the beginning of my lessons at the hand of Pierre Reynal. He taught me to swim, and how to dive without making a great splashing, and how to run smoothly, effortlessly; how to walk softly, how to ride a horse and talk to it; how to load a gun and shoot it; he taught me the names of birds and beasts and insects and grasses and flowers. He carried me into the very heart of nature.

And doing these things, you will say: “How could any mortal fail to love such a teacher?”

I, being concerned with the truth only, must confess that at the end of it all, I felt nothing but a greater aversion for Pierre Reynal than I had felt when he was only an unknown to me. To be sure, he was now a necessity to me; and as I walked, gripping the ground with my toes and feeling the growth of ropy muscles which began to clothe my body — or as I swam against the current with a

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confident stroke — I realized that Reynal was giving to my body that true temper which he admired.

Nevertheless, I was so firmly grounded in a belief that he hated me, that I was sure he was only making me strong for my destruction.

Here I must make a pause to speak of my brother, and of how he came home.

VI

YOU must understand that this event of the return of my brother grew greater and greater in importance with each year; for each year brought closer the moment when he would leave his college and return to the château to live his life. That is to say, this was the plan for which Monsieur hoped and prayed.

I say "prayed" advisedly, though you will think it very strange that Monsieur should pray, far less pray for the control of the affairs of one of his own children. Yet it was true that the living creature whom he most loved, whom alone he loved in this world, was the one which dared to lift head and defy him. Sometimes I have thought that it was owing to the very love which Monsieur bore him that Hubert Guillaume dared so much before his terrible father; he knew that wild passion which Monsieur felt for him and therefore he imposed upon his father. I have told myself that to explain

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a boldness which used to seem more than natural to me.

But it is not true. I see those dead years in a clearer light of reason and understanding now; and among other things, I am sure that Hubert Guillaume Limousin defied his father simply out of the largeness of a spirit like that of Monsieur himself. Each was a mirror of the other. The soul of Monsieur was the soul of Hubert Guillaume. And the soul of Hubert Guillaume was the soul of Monsieur.

When I think of myself related to all that followed, it is as of a mouse looking forth from its hole upon the battle of two tigers. There was always some subject for combat between them, but the principal matter of debate was always the future of Hubert. For he was by no means wedded to the thought of a life at the château and when he burst into one of his rages—which occurred at least every week during his vacation, he was sure to declare his intention of becoming a lawyer.

This year, Hubert came home a man. He had been a boy at Christmas, but he returned for the summer a man. At Christmas he had been nineteen; now he was twenty, but I felt as though ten years

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were pushed behind him. When I first saw him, I shrank from him, as usual, because he had a peculiar talent for making me miserable; but on this day he paused a moment over me and took hold of me, laying his broad thumbs in the hollows of my shoulders.

"Why," said Hubert, "our little Jean is out of dresses at last, I think!"

You observe that even when Hubert Guillaume softened, his tongue was still sharp, but I was so astonished by this attention from him that I trembled with delight.

He turned to Pierre Reynal.

"I have heard that you are working with him. Well, Monsieur, this is very fine—this is very fine! There is color in his cheeks and his eyes are brighter and—pshaw! what an arm!"

"Hubert," I broke out, "I can swim four hundred yards! I swear that it is true!"

At this he laughed; and his voice had so deepened that I was reminded weirdly of the laughter of Monsieur. When my father saw Hubert Guillaume, before they had touched hands, he cried out: "My God, Hubert, you are my height to a hair's breadth."

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"But I lack a good many hair-breadths of having your shoulders," said Hubert.

"That will come when you are a man, my boy," said Monsieur.

"Do you think," said Hubert, "that I am so far from being a man now?"

That was the first note of war — even before they had touched hands, as I have said.

We all sat at the lunch table together.

"And what have you been doing lately?" said Monsieur. "Besides the rowing, what have you been doing of interest?"

Hubert threw up his fine head, which was his way of courting danger. He was like Monsieur in this also; he was always free to tell the world his business and his thoughts; if the world approved, very well — if the world did not approve, it would go to the devil!

"I have been playing cards a good deal," said Hubert. "Next to the crew, that was the most important thing. Yes, even more important."

He knew that he was treading heavily on the toes of Monsieur. Gambling was a vice which my father did not have and therefore he hated it.

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"You have not, however, been playing for money," said Monsieur, with that smile of his in which his even white teeth showed behind the beard.

"I have, however," said Hubert, "been playing for money. Every one does!"

"You know my mind on that subject, Hubert?"

"One can not be a booby, sir, when all of one's companions are doing a thing —— "

There would have been an explosion instantly, but it was the first day of Hubert's vacation and therefore Monsieur withheld his hand. He merely developed the subject, keeping his voice under control, though my mother and I stopped eating and watched for the crisis. "I suppose," said Monsieur, "that you were led on because you have had beginner's luck?"

"Not at all," said Hubert. "I lost from the first, and kept on playing for fear they should think that I minded the loss."

"So!" said Monsieur.

He did not mind spending great sums of money even for small ends, but he hated to throw gold away. I do not think, for instance, that he ever gave a penny to charity. Now he was very angry, but he raised his wine-glass.

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"I drink to your better fortune, Hubert," said he.

"You are very kind, Monsieur!"

They drank to each other. The rest of us tasted the wine timidly, hoping that the cloud had blown over. But alas! it was only beginning.

It was Hubert, driven on by a fierce imp of the perverse, who pursued the question now.

"However," said he, "my losses are not very high. Eleven hundred dollars would cover the total; but they are very pressing. Of course my friends expect their checks by the first mail after my arrival home."

You will observe that Hubert felt little assurance on this point, and therefore he expressed much. It was his way. It was the way of Monsieur!

"They expect your checks by the first mail?" said Monsieur, smiling wickedly. "Ah, yes."

Why could not Hubert leave well enough alone? There was nothing up to the last penny of Monsieur's fortune that my brother could not have wheedled from him, but he disdained wheedling. Again he was Monsieur!

So he said calmly: "They will not be disappointed, I presume, sir."

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"They will not be disappointed?" echoed Monsieur, with the terrible thunder beginning to rumble in his voice. "I can not tell, I can not tell. It is a matter, Hubert, which depends upon your conduct—your good conduct!"

The smile of Hubert was the smile of Monsieur; there was a small white spot in the pit of either cheek.

"My conduct, sir," said he, "I shall attempt to make all that you may desire."

"Good!" said Monsieur. "Then we have heard the last concerning this foolish stuff—this law——?"

I, who sat next to Hubert, heard the gritting of his teeth. "I trust," he said aloud, "that I do not understand you, sir."

"And why do you trust that?" asked Monsieur, with the look of a devil.

"Because for the moment," said Hubert, "it seems that you are bargaining with me, sir."

"I am a business man, Hubert. And I offer you a business proposition. Give up the law; consent to settle down at the château—give me your word for it—and I pay these debts."

"Monsieur," said Hubert, sitting stiff and straight, "these gambling debts are matters of honor. I should be a ruined man, sir, if they were not paid instantly!"

"Beyond a doubt! Beyond a doubt!" said Monsieur. "I am considering all that. And therefore I make you a proposition which you have such a great reason for closing with instantly!"

Hubert Guillaume stood up from his chair.

"Monsieur," said he in a voice that was no more than a whisper, though it almost made me faint in my chair, "Monsieur, I am your son."

"You are my son," said Monsieur. "Sit down, Hubert!"

"You are attempting, sir, to strike a bargain on the honor of your son!"

Monsieur bounded up and all the dishes and glassware on the table gave out a musical shivering sound. He struck his hands together.

"Do you hear me, young fool? A little more such talk as this, and I send you from the room! My word has been passed! And now I shall confirm it with my oath, Hubert. If I do not have your instant promise to do in all things as I bid you—and

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if I do not have your apology for your present conduct and language, by the God who hears us, I shall not pay one penny of your damnable gambling debts. Do you hear me?"

"Monsieur," said Hubert, "I can not listen when my father dishonors himself and me!"

And he walked from the room. You are astonished, as I was astonished then, that Monsieur let him go; it was the very intensity of my father's rage at being so bearded that chained him to the spot. But when he recovered himself, I saw all the rage disappear from his contorted features and fear take its place. It was a ghastly thing to watch.

He was almost like a frightened boy as he ran to the chair of my mother.

"Julie," he whispered, "did he go up to his room? Did you hear his step upon the stairs?"

"Yes," said my trembling mother.

Monsieur threw up his great arms.

"Help me—pity me, God!" he gasped, and leaped to the door shouting: "Hubert! Hubert! Hubert! I retract, Hubert! Hubert, do you hear?"

This was his voice that thronged the room with thunder, but as he tore open the door we heard

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distinctly the explosion of a revolver in a distant part of the house.

“Christ!” breathed Monsieur, and reeled against the wall with his hands clutched over his face as though the bullet had gone through his own brain.

VII

ALL night I slept and wakened, and wakened and slept, like a soldier about to be called for a dangerous duty. In the morning we learned that Monsieur had gone to bed at the usual time—or at least he had retired to his room, as though ashamed that even the death of his son could be suspected of disturbing his habits. But when the house was dark and quiet, he had stolen out and had ranged up and down the château, up and down the woods; yet as we gathered at the breakfast table, my mother and I in black, we found that Monsieur was dressed in a suit of gay Scotch tweed and he had taken a bright little crimson flower for his buttonhole.

“You are late! You are late!” said Monsieur as we came into the room, I behind my mother. “But that is due to the strange warmth of this weather. I have never seen such a June. Have you, Julie? You must get out into the woods after

breakfast. The trees have growing pains; they are green, I tell you! And while you stop to light a cigarette—a flower turns from a bud to a blossom under your eyes. Oh, it is delightful, Julie!”

One could see, by this, that he had chosen to act that part which would be least expected of him. The world looked to see him bear himself in the manner of the chief actor in a tragedy. Therefore he chose to disappoint us and act as in a springtime comedy. For he was always acting. Perhaps you have not understood this before. But it is true. Even his bluntness, his frankness on all occasions—this was an affectation, too. He was never truly himself, but what he wished himself to be. It required, often, very great acting; but acting it always remained. I do not think that other people saw this, for the people were mature, whereas I was a child; and a sensitive child sees things which the mature eye could never descend to.

My mother was making some sort of a murmured, polite answer. She was as baffled as ever, as remote from understanding him. She would have been frightfully shocked by this light tone of Monsieur if she had not known that he loved the boy who

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was dead more than he loved all the world that was left alive.

"I am touched," went on Monsieur, "to see that you and *your* boy have put on black for Hubert Guillaume."

Yes, these were the very words that he flung at us like a leveled gun. If you say that no man could have been so dastardly, I nevertheless assure you that this is the truth. My mother cringed. A devilish pleasure came in his eyes. He raised the whip again.

"A kind concern for Hubert," went on Monsieur, "but, my dear, is it not a little stupid?"

"I have only meant to do what is right—what you will approve of, François," said she.

"Well, well!" said Monsieur. "But this is a point on which I have never given you instruction, is it not? And therefore you can not expect to know a lesson when you have never had a chance to read the book in which it is written? Well, I must admit all of that. But let me teach you now. May I teach you now, Julie, my dear wife?"

But these can not be the words! Yes, they are the words, but they are not the fact, for it is impos-

sible for me to convey the full devilishness of his drawling voice.

"You may do as you please," said my mother, beginning to tremble.

"Well, my dear Julie, I wish to point out that such a concern is cruel, at the bottom. For do you think that Hubert Guillaume has left this world and been dissipated into nothingness? Do you think that the hundred and seventy odd pounds of cold flesh lying up-stairs is all that remains of Hubert Guillaume?"

My mother gasped and clung to the edge of the table, dizzy, her eyes half closed. Frightful though it is to tell it even from this distance of years—he saw her as she was and—struck her again!

"No, François!" whispered my mother. "No, François! I do not think that!"

"You forget your breakfast," said Monsieur. "The eggs are already cold. And is that bacon crisp? It is not, by heaven! The cook must hear of this, my dear!"

"Yes, yes," said my mother, with her shaking hands making vague motions toward eating. "I shall speak to the cook."

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"Returning to the dead boy——" said Monsieur.

"Ah, God!" whispered my mother, growing whiter than ever.

Here I leaped from my chair in a child's frenzy, with my teeth set and my hands gripped tight.

"You shall not do it any more!" I shouted at Monsieur. "You are killing my mother, Monsieur! You are killing my sweet mother!"

What did Monsieur do? He leaned back in his chair and laughed at me, and combed his black beard and laughed luxuriously again.

"See, see, Julie!" said he, "what a little knight your boy has grown to be. And what an excellent imitator! One touch of rebellion from Hubert Guillaume—and now this. Every kitten will shortly attempt to play the cat."

"Leave the table, Jean," said my mother to me.

"No, no, no!" said Monsieur. "He must stay. The young hero must stay. But what can he mean? Can he possibly mean that I have wounded you, Julie? No, but I see very clearly what the truth is. What was Hubert Guillaume to you? He was not your flesh; why should you be troubled by this ridiculous fuss?"

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“François! I loved Hubert—I——”

“You must not weep,” said Monsieur.

She rallied with a great effort.

“I shall not weep,” said my mother, while I sat wretched in my place, staring from one to the other, knowing that my outbreak had only made things worse, and wishing that a bolt from heaven would break through the roof and carry all that house to perdition—so long as Monsieur might be one of those who perished.

“We have become quite confused,” said he, taking a good swallow of coffee. “We have quite tangled ourselves in so many little digressions. But what I mean to say, in short, is that we can not, surely, mourn for a soul that has gone to Heaven.”

“Indeed, no, François.”

“Excellent!” said Monsieur. “Then why should we mourn for Hubert Guillaume unless—but is it so?—do you consider him such a damned soul, Julie?”

“François, in pity!”

“Ah, Julie, still you will avoid me. But this is a matter in which I need your voice. We will begin by admitting that there are flaws in your education; that we can not set up Julie as a universal authority.

But upon one subject I dare swear that she can speak as well as any one in this world. Julie, upon this theme you should be expert—upon Heaven, I mean!”

“François!”

“Do not protest! You are a saint! And you have been given into the arms of such a husband in order that your martyrdom might be developed—in order that your sainthood should be well-ripened, let me say, so that you may ascend to the blessed land beyond death with the full flavor. As such an authority—as such a practiser of devotion and charity and all the other virtues whose names, for the moment, I forget—as such an authority, I really must beg of you to tell me: Could Hubert Guillaume inherit Heaven, damned as he was by so many of my own vices?”

My mother managed to say that she knew of no great vices in Hubert. Here he broke in upon her again:

“You know of none? Do you not know me? And do you not know that there was much of me in him? And tell me, Julie, are you not honestly aware that I am destined for the high court of the Devil?”

“François,” said my mother, standing bravely against this bludgeoning, “I think that Hubert Guillaume was a proud strong soul, but a good boy.”

“Julie, my love,” sneered Monsieur, “I lay ten myriads of thanks at your feet. From this moment my last care about Hubert is gone. I rejoice that he has left us, though so abruptly, upon the upward road. With your authority, Julie, I shall always picture him to myself as one of the saved! Shall I not?”

He had continued too long. My mother had leaned her face for a moment in one hand; now she settled gradually forward—like a sleepy child, one might have said—and laid her head on her arm.

Monsieur snapped his fingers. “Julie!” he called. She did not answer.

“Julie—I command!—no tears!”

Still she did not speak, and Monsieur with a terrible face jumped up and strode around the table. He drew her back by the shoulder and her head fell to the side. She had fainted. All that was wonderful was that she had withstood the torment so long.

Monsieur looked down upon her for a moment.

“A little too much talk of Heaven,” said he.

VIII

THE priest came from the village and found Monsieur walking in the garden, whistling, and giving directions to the head gardener.

"I have heard of the sad loss that has come to Monsieur," said the gentle man.

"You mean, of course, the suicide of my son?" said Monsieur in a big cheerful voice. "Well?"

"In such times, it is my duty to offer my help," said the priest. "Will you tell me how I may serve you?"

"Will you tell me, Father, in what I need service?" said Monsieur.

"Your son——" said the priest.

"He is gone," said Monsieur, "beyond the reach of your voice, I fear. Whether up or down, I can not tell—if there *is* an up or a down. I have recently had an assurance—of almost professional authority—that he has taken the upward road. At least, I consider that subject closed."

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"It shall be my privilege, then," said the priest, "to offer up my prayers for him."

"Do not do so," said Monsieur. "It is a peculiarity of the Limousins that they are either very well saved or very well damned, and I should be grieved to have you lose your labor."

"May I ask, then, Monsieur, if the burial is arranged? I presume it is to be in the holy ground of the church?"

"You presume too much," said Monsieur. "I shall make his grave near the château."

"At whatever hour you choose, then," said the priest, "I shall be ready for the service."

"I thank you a thousand times," answered my father, "but in having been partly responsible for his coming into this world and having been partly responsible for his sudden departure from it, I shall attend to putting him under the ground without the help of any other hands."

"Monsieur," said the priest sternly, "I do not wish to say it—but this is sacrilege! For the sake of your own soul, Monsieur!"

"It is now twenty years," said Monsieur, "since that subject worried me. Good morning, Father!"

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And the priest left him.

The site of the grave was a hillock just south of the château. Two huge maple trees shaded the place, which would have overlooked the river except for the height of the forest. Such a small obstacle was nothing to my father. In a little time a crowd of axes were slashing at the woods, opening a great raw-edged gap through them. And nearly every available man on the place and from the village was employed to follow the hewers and remove the stumps. It was a riotous furious labor, for Monsieur insisted that the work should be done before the dusk. All that long day the crowds moiled and toiled, but while the sun was still well above the western trees, a way had been cleft through the forest, the stumps had been torn or blasted from the rich soil, which was raked and leveled, and now from the hillock beneath the maples the eye reached pleasantly through a long avenue and across the Limousin River.

Then Monsieur gave orders to Reynal and d'Argenteau to lift the body and carry it out. There was no coffin. While Hubert Guillaume lay on the grass with his dead face turned to the sky, picks

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and shovels sank the grave. Monsieur jumped into the pit, received Hubert in his arms, and lowered him to the floor. After that, he sprang out again, with his own hands refilled the grave, raised the mound above it, and in the gathering dusk gave directions that a great slab of gray stone be dragged to the top of the hill and placed on the site. That was all of the ceremony. Monsieur sat down to dinner as calmly and as cheerfully as though he had been out hunting all the day.

Sometimes I say to myself that it is doubtful which gave Monsieur the more pleasure: the stern repression of his own emotion, or the knowledge that this singular funeral ceremony would fill the countryside with talk and with horror.

He bore up during five or six days, after this. He was more amiable, bright and cheerful, than I had ever seen him. I knew, for instance, that the loss of Hubert made him detest me. Why should his first son have been taken and such a weakling left on the earth? Yet he forced himself to show a peculiar interest in me. He even attended some of my lessons under d'Argenteau; he even walked out to see Reynal putting me through my paces on

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a horse. I was at that time learning to sit a trot without a saddle—yes, and with my arms folded across my chest! My father watched until I skidded off at a sharp turn. He picked me up, laughing.

“Well, Reynal,” said he, “is he not becoming a man?”

If you could know the feeling between Monsieur and me this would seem very wonderful to you—such a little thing as this.

However, at the end of the fifth day, Monsieur collapsed. We heard a great voice rolling through the house at dusk, and Reynal went up to the third floor and found Monsieur standing in the room of Hubert with a light in his hand, searching everywhere, and calling out impatiently:

“Hubert! Where the devil are you, Hubert?” He turned to Reynal.

“Where can he be? Has he slipped out to go night-fishing?”

“No, I think there is a girl in the village——” said Reynal.

So he managed to get Monsieur back to his room and then he had the courage to remain there with him, after covertly sending one of the servants

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after the doctor. Monsieur, staggering with fever, his eyes wild with delirium, roved back and forth through the room, talking constantly of Hubert.

When the doctor came there was a great trouble to get Monsieur to bed, but Pierre Reynal managed it by persuasion, after a time, when the others had almost given up.

For ten days Monsieur was in danger of his life; and it was a fortnight after the crisis passed before he could be wheeled out into the shade of the summer day. I remember wondering at his lank pallor. It was said at the time that nothing could have saved him from dying except the angelic patience of my mother, who brought her own self to the verge of a collapse by refusing to leave his bed.

In fact, I have heard it said—though it seems too wonderful for any credence—that in the early days of his delirium, when the full measure of his strength was still with him, and when four men could not keep him in his bed, my mother would run to the raging monster and take his great wrists in her childlike hands, and force him back upon the pillow.

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Worn and weary as she became, I never saw such happiness in her as when she had the life of Monsieur in the small hollow of her hand day after day. For the first time, I was pushed into the background and I began to understand that she loved him still as she had loved him on their wedding-day. A thousand enormities could not change her to the moment of her death.

The doctors wished to send Monsieur out of the August heats to the mountains, but he refused to go. In a week he was walking, and by September he was nearly back to his full power. That sorrow left upon him only one mark: he had a jagged tuft of silver in the hair above his right temple—on that side only, without a gray hair on the left of his head. So that if his appearance had been strange and awful before, it was doubly so now.

Early in October, he came back from his first day of hunting; he came back in the dusk and ordered every one in the house to be gathered before him in the big ballroom. Lamps were carried there hastily; and every one thronged in, beginning with my mother and ending with the lowest scullion. It made a very odd scene. That room had not been

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used since the death of Monsieur's first wife. I could not think of it, far less step into it, without feeling her spirit fall strongly about me. All the windows were heavily shuttered and hung across with curtains on the inside—all except one which had been forced open and which allowed a wild current of night wind to stream in, fluttering aprons, fanning hair loose, and tossing the flames in the threats of the lamps.

"I have called you together," said Monsieur, "to speak to you about gambling, and particularly about card-playing. I do not wish to put what I have to say upon the basis of morals. I am not interested in them. But I have a strong prejudice against gambling in all its forms, my friends. A very strong prejudice! The reasons for it I shall not discuss. The fact is sufficient."

With this, he turned his brilliant eye across the crowd. It flecked me, among the rest.

He went on:

"I shall not spy out your pleasures. I shall appoint no one to watch you. My direction to you is simply this: Do not allow gambling to come to my notice. For, the instant you do, those who have

been concerned in it must leave the château forever. I speak to every one who lives under my roof."

He dismissed us, then, and my mother and I crowded out with the rest.

"Did you mark what Monsieur said?" asked my mother.

"He seemed to say that if you or I, even——"

"It was aimed at you, Jean. You are young, but you will never forget such a thing as this. If you gamble and he learns of it, Jean, you will be cut off from him. He has warned you. He will never speak of it again—but if you transgress, there will be no mercy. You understand, dear?"

As if I needed such a warning when the death-shot of Hubert Guillaume was still ringing at my ears!

IX

IN THE writing of recollections such as these are, nothing is more difficult than to maintain a view-point which is continually changing. Therefore I shall not attempt to trouble you with myself at the ages of twelve and fourteen, of sixteen and eighteen. I skip at once from my eleventh to my twentieth year.

I showed you last a too sensitive child, with a frail body and a pretty face. I present myself to you again in another condition in my twentieth year.

That sinewy lover of the woods, Pierre Reynal, had made me follow him through the forest for ten long years. He had taught me to trail and to shoot, to run great distances at high speed like an Indian, to trudge on foot under great weights like a trapper, to swim, to box, to wrestle, to ride. In all of these things I had acquired very extraordinary proficiency.

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I do not mean that I had become a wonder to be pointed at, but I was far beyond an average. I had before me the grim picture of Monsieur as an ideal to struggle toward; in that work I knew that I must make immense efforts, but I was ready for the labor, keeping for years the hope that some day I should grow to a sufficient bulk and a sufficient might of hand to please even Monsieur. But fate limited me. On the one hand it raised me up; on the other hand, it cast me down.

Fate raised me up by taking from me the delicate prettiness of my childhood; at twenty I was blessed with a good square jaw which redeemed me. But the matter in which fate cast me down was size.

I understand what a vastly important matter size is in a man. You perhaps have in your mind an ideal vision of a stalwart six-footer, big-thewed, with the arms of a Hercules—though my own observation is that a man of a hundred and sixty pounds will outwalk, outrun, outwork—yes, and outfight the majority of the lumbering big men. However, I was not destined to attain to even such a middle size. Perhaps many of you will wish to

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close this book at this point when I confess that I am a little man, and that at my tallest and straightest I was a scant quarter of an inch above five feet and eight inches in height; and that my weight never ran an ounce above a hundred and forty pounds. As the years went on and I found myself at twenty weighing just what I had at eighteen, and the period of growing definitely ended, I came to understand that I must habitually lift my head when I was in the lofty presence of Monsieur.

A weak man must work by sleight of hand and tough endurance; it was my good fortune to have a Pierre Reynal to give me both qualities. I never could stagger him in wrestling, yet I could often flash my gloved hands past his guard as we boxed. I never could attain to his uncanny skill with guns; but at last I could run as fast and as far as he. And I measured the growth of manhood by my ability to look upon Pierre Reynal more as a human being and less as a devil. Not that I could understand him, but I at least had gained enough courage to ask questions.

"Why," said I to Reynal, "should a man like you, with many accomplishments, with experience

in the world, pass his life in an obscure corner of the wilderness?"

"That is a question, Monsieur Jean," said he. This was the usual barrier which he erected against curiosity. On this day, I whirled on him with anger.

"Answer me, Reynal!" I commanded, and stamped my foot.

I was ashamed at once and expected him to laugh in my face; but he was a fellow who seldom so much as smiled—though smile he did not. He decided to give me an answer.

"If I were in Paris or in London, say," remarked Pierre, "would I be any nearer to the sky than I am now?"

"Do you love nature so much?" said I contemptuously. "Are you a poet, then, Reynal?"

"If you consider that," said Reynal, "you will see that we are all poets, more or less."

"Bah!" said I. "Is Monsieur a poet?"

His hideous smile twisted his face again.

"Yes, Monsieur Jean—a dramatic poet!"

What could one do with such a man? I only knew that I must be right and that Pierre Reynal, with those talents which he possessed, could not be

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at the Château Limousin without some hidden motive—some motive most ominous to me, or else there was no prophecy in the dread which took my breath every day at the first sight of his ugly face.

How many hours I spent speculating on the ends of Reynal I should be ashamed to say, but I was chiefly convinced that his presence in that house concerned me and that in the end, therefore, I should be drawn into a frightful disaster through his means. You will say that this is the sort of prophecy which is always written down after the event; but I assure you that long before dénouement I talked of this feeling of mine to my mother. My mother feared Reynal as I feared him, at first, but I believe that a woman grows calloused more quickly than a man. At any rate, she grew accustomed to Reynal.

“It is only his homely face, Jean,” said she. “What has he done, ever, to harm you or to harm any other person?”

Before I finish speaking of Reynal at this time, I must add that during the many years he had been in our household now—that is to say more than fourteen years of service—Monsieur himself had never treated him as a mere hired servant.

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D'Argenteau was a different matter. Monsieur despised him, and so did I in spite of his great learning. He could sweep a page with a single glance, lift the facts off it, and imprison them in his memory for ever. He had read everything, and he remembered everything. His fault was a lack of order in his mind, but he gave me a good education even if it were a spotted one.

As for my mother, she had not grown older. She was married to Monsieur when she was only seventeen and I was born the next year. When I was twenty, she looked scarcely eight years older than I. There was not a line in her face. Her eye lighted as readily as the eye of any child. Her laughter was as sweet and as smooth. Time had brought her a little nearer to Heaven, and that was all. How much nearer, I could not guess!

Monsieur is the last of the three people who made up my life. He retained his vigor and went out on tremendous all-day marches when he hunted with Pierre Reynal. In the meantime I had formed a comparison which I felt gave some clue to his nature. My reading supplied me with the figures of Zeus and Mephistopheles. I felt that Monsieur could be considered a composition of their natures.

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So I explained Monsieur to myself, but still I realized that there was something left of him over and above my explanation.

Here, then, is all the background of my life in brief as I come to that day in my twentieth year when I went down to the river to meet Reynal and found him seated with d'Argenteau under a tree—and there were cards in their hands!

X

SINCE the death of Hubert Guillaume and even before the warning which Monsieur had pronounced to the household, I had considered gambling as a thing out of which human blood flows as naturally as from a knife-cut. I was stopped with a shock of horror while d'Argenteau, with a wretched exclamation, began to sweep up the cards and the money. Reynal stopped him.

"Monsieur Jean is not a traitor," said he. "You need not be afraid."

"He may ruin us with one word to Monsieur; we are in his hands!" cried d'Argenteau.

Reynal fixed his grisly eye upon me.

"You need not fear," he repeated to his companion. "You will not betray us, Monsieur?"

I was filled with loathing—partly at the sight of the detested cards and partly because I had found Reynal with d'Argenteau. It was as though one

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of the principal devils were to amuse himself in the company of a minor imp.

"I shall tell nothing," said I briefly. "And yet, I should be glad to know what makes you do this. Particularly since you know what has happened in the château. You, d'Argenteau—are you not afraid that it will get you a cut throat?"

They seemed to be more sheepish than afraid; and I waited for a fortnight to receive some sort of an explanation. None was forthcoming, and at last my impatience was too much for me. I broke out on a day when Reynal was teaching me fine points in putting a horse over the jumps. He was saying:

"There are horses of all kinds, Monsieur Jean. Some grand, big-moving fellows go raging at a jump; you must give them a quieting pull and tell them that they are not to swallow the moon on this day. Then you will have your old veteran who no longer tastes the fun of the thing and hops over with trailing heels; a tip from the whip is his medicine. Or again, there is a trembling nervous creature like this mare you are riding to-day. She tells herself that she is very small and the wall is very

high, but if you gather her heart in your hand and give her a cheerful word, she may fly that wall better than all the rest. She is not a coward, but she has nerves that make her doubt herself. If you can breathe into her the courage to try, she may be the best of all. These little nervous horses, for the very reason that they have the sense to doubt themselves, may prove the wisest jumpers and the greatest hearts of all, if they will only learn to try."

"It is always like this!" I cried. "You speak of horses, but obliquely your meaning is always I. What is it that you wish me to find courage for? What is the great thing that I am to attempt? Am I to brave Monsieur and play cards under the trees?"

He did not answer me, but watched me with an inscrutable face as he had done a thousand times before; as if he were weighing and judging me. He had a talent for silence that never failed to embarrass me.

"What is the meaning of it, Reynal?" I asked. "Why should a man like you, all iron, without foolishness, do such a weak thing as gamble?"

"There is d'Argenteau now," said he. "He has more words than I."

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He beckoned d'Argenteau out of the woods, where that rascal was lurking and repeated my words. It seemed to take him aback for a moment, but he recovered heart at once.

My tutor cast a guilty glance over his shoulder ; then he brought a pack from his pocket and flicked the cards with a whirring noise.

"Consider, Monsieur Jean," said he, "that this is a sad little life we lead in this world!"

"Do cards make it a bigger thing?" I asked, still full of contempt.

"Ah," said d'Argenteau, "that is according to the view-point. There are two ways of looking at a book, let us say. On the one hand it is so much white paper marked with ink. On the other hand it is the voice of Job, of David, of Homer, or Shakespeare calling out of the deep well of the centuries."

I smiled at this eloquence.

"Come," said I. "I shall listen to you, now. Let me hear you make that comparison good!"

"I shall do it, Monsieur Jean, have no doubt. I have only illustrated a greater thing with a lesser."

"Impossible!" said I.

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"Do you think so?"

"What is greater than Homer, then? These silly cards?"

"He was only a poet and a poet deals only with the beauty of life; but there is a greater thing in life than its beauty. There is the cruel strength of life—there is fate, Monsieur Jean!"

"You can not hypnotize me with a great many words," said I coldly. "What have these things to do with fate?"

"You are not an ignorant child. You know that some of the greatest souls in the world have loved Chance—worshiped her!"

"Every drunkard," said I with the rigid authority of virtuous youth, "excuses himself by speaking of the great men who have loved wine. This manner of talk does not convince me, d'Argenteau. I am only bored."

And I looked away from him across the schooling ground, across the shining river and over the dark evergreens beyond, and to the clear blue sky, all towered with brilliant white clouds. As a matter of fact, I was eager to hear what more he had to say of such a mystery.

"You are bored, Monsieur Jean," said d'Argenteau, "and yet these little cards put a gun to the head of Hubert Guillaume and shot him through the brains!"

I jerked my glance back to him and with a wild impulse I raised my hand. The coward shrank from me, and my own scorn of him made me lower my arm.

"Forgive me!" said d'Argenteau. "Yet these things are all true; sometimes a shock is needed to open the mind. But in fact, out of the movements of these cards there comes the face of the greatest power of the universe—Fate, Monsieur; it is fate that we hunt for in these games!"

He said it so solemnly that I shivered with conviction. Yet I argued: "You are not hunting dollars, then? You are not simply trying to get something for nothing?"

In place of answer, d'Argenteau smiled upon Reynal and Reynal smiled at d'Argenteau. I felt that I was pushed away from the heart of the discussion, as a child is put off by his elders when they speak of something beyond the comprehension of tender years.

“Do men go mad for the love of money? Do they throw away themselves for money? Do they sacrifice all that is near to them and all that is dear to them? Observe, Monsieur Jean—is Reynal a light-minded man?”

It was the most convincing argument of all.

He began to manipulate the cards with active fingers as he spoke; then he kneeled on the smooth grass and dealt, flashing the polished cards through sun and shadow in the mottled shade of the tree.

He talked as he dealt: “Here is a hand to you, my dear Reynal. I place another hand here. A third hand to myself. You observe? I pick up my own hand, a card at a time. The first card? It is a hope. The second card? My heart looks still higher. The third card? No, it is nothing! The fourth card—it has joined all three before it. Perhaps the fifth card will give me a wonderful strength—with that strength I shall crush the other hands; I shall run the betting to the sky. I shall see the sweat form on the forehead of Reynal! The fifth card—bah! it is nothing—the hand is empty.”

“My hand,” said Reynal seriously, gathering up the cards, “is worth a bet.”

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"Let us see the third," said d'Argenteau. "Ah—ah! What a pity, Monsieur Jean, that you did not hold it! You could have wagered to the skies! Ah, well!"

And he gathered the cards into a neat pack again. "Do you begin to understand a little better?"

Suddenly I sat down cross-legged and made the third angle of the group.

"Deal me another hand," said I. "At least it will do no harm for me to understand the thing. Let me have a hand."

"I?" cried d'Argenteau, the hypocrite. "Could I do such a thing to the son of Monsieur? In the first place, he would tear me to pieces——"

"Nonsense!" cried I. "Do you think I am a weakling? Do you dream that I shall allow this thing to become a habit with me? It is no more than an experiment."

"Never!" cried d'Argenteau, shaking his head with violence.

"It is on his own head," said Reynal again. "Let him do as he wishes."

D'Argenteau looked at me once, sharply; then he dealt.

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You have guessed it already. They had drawn me in with the utmost ease. They began, of course, by allowing me to win. And then again! I had a few dollars in my pocket to begin with; it swelled to half a hundred in those few instants, and I was drunk with joy.

Afterward, of course, I lost, and lost; my money was gone.

"Bad luck!" cried d'Argenteau sympathetically.

"It is the end," said I, filled with gloom. "My money is finished."

"Ah, but your credit is good!" laughed d'Argenteau. "And in another moment, you will be having a run of good luck as surprising as this run of bad luck. It is always that way. There is a balance in the game. That is the beauty of it. Is it not, Reynal?"

"Yes, of course it is so," said Reynal.

The game ended while I was still a few dollars ahead. And I fell asleep dreaming of the hundred hands in which a difference in one card.

Every day thereafter we had a few moments, stolen here or there, but usually in the secret heart of the woods. Of course, I lost. It was only a

little until I began to plunge to make up my losses. And straightway I found myself a hundred, five hundred dollars in the debt of d'Argenteau. It was always d'Argenteau. Reynal seemed to remain about even with the game.

D'Argenteau was extremely sympathetic, but he would always say: "Now is the time that I should stop—while I am ahead. Because, in the long run, the chances must be equalized and you will draw even again—then ahead!"

"Only to-day's game!" I would insist. "This shall be the last time. You can not refuse me a chance to recoup, d'Argenteau!"

"Ah, well," he would say, "I must submit. I can not refuse a loser!"

Was it not simple?

Within a month the blow dropped upon me. Monsieur announced on a day: "I feel that Jean has studied at home long enough. It is time that he went to a school, d'Argenteau."

"As you will, Monsieur."

I was struck with terror. If d'Argenteau were sent away and if he asked me for the money I owed him——?

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"No, no, Monsieur," I insisted, "there is a great store in the mind of Monsieur d'Argenteau, and I have barely touched it!"

Monsieur fixed me with his bright eye.

"Has Monsieur d'Argenteau taught you to address me in such a loud voice?" he asked. "Then it is time for you to change masters. I shall hear no arguing, Jean. It is finished!"

XI

AS SOON as I looked around me, I decided that things could not be so bad, because a paltry debt of five hundred dollars could not ruin the heir to the enormous fortune of Limousin. It was odd that in this condition I should think of that somber man, Pierre Reynal; but think of him I did, chiefly because he had money. It had happened that in talk with the president of Monsieur's bank he had used Reynal to illustrate the ease with which a thrifty man will save. He had said:

"Consider Monsieur Reynal, for instance. In the fifteen years of his service he has amassed as many thousands of dollars. A very thrifty, wise man is that same Pierre Reynal!"

I thought as much myself and now I determined to go to him, not because I felt the slightest friendship for him or expected him to feel the slightest friendship for me, but because I felt that even an enemy, who understood what my financial expecta-

tions were, could not but be glad to lend me money and take a handsome profit upon me, besides the advantage of gaining my sense of obligation to him.

So I went to Reynal. I told him my situation as directly and as frankly as Monsieur himself could have done.

"You know, Reynal," said I, "that I owe money to d'Argenteau and that he is about to leave; I have no money to pay my debt to him, although it is only five hundred dollars. I am ashamed to go to my mother and tell her the story. Now you, Reynal, I believe to be a saving man. Surely you have a great deal of money in the bank. If you will advance me five hundred dollars, I shall be glad to give you my note for a thousand."

Reynal sighed and shook his head.

"At least," said I, astonished, "you can not doubt that I shall be good for such an amount?"

"Good for it?" smiled Reynal. "Monsieur Jean, I realize that to the heir of Monsieur five hundred dollars is less than a penny to Pierre Reynal. But why do you come to me? I, too, have played with d'Argenteau. The scoundrel has charmed the cards!"

I was about to tell him that it was impossible that he should lose fifteen thousand dollars at cards to a single man, but I saw that if he were lying to me in order to avoid paying me the money, it would simply embarrass him to tell him what I knew about his savings.

This refusal reduced my resources terribly. I left him, knowing now that it was true he hated me and wished my ruin. I decided to attempt d'Argenteau.

I told him my situation, that I had not a penny of cash, that I was ashamed to ask my mother, and that Monsieur, of course, needed only one hint of the truth of the matter to ruin me instantly and cast me out of the house. To me the world seemed more terrible than a dragon, more awful than Monsieur himself. Besides, I was not very brave. How many admissions I have made to you! But now I must make this admission also. I was not very brave. I was no more of hero than I was a giant, and at the thought of being thrown out into life with nothing to rely upon except my own wits, I assure you that my stomach shrank and my face grew cold.

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D'Argenteau was more full of words than Reynal.

"Alas," said he, "I wish to God that I could oblige you, Monsieur Jean!"

"Is it impossible?" said I.

"Consider that your violent father has already given his orders. I am to be taken away to-morrow, presented with a ticket to Quebec and so an end to fifteen years of my life. I, a man no longer young, am cast out with no resource. Is it not a sad thing?"

"Do you mean that you have no money except the five hundred dollars which I owe you?"

"I have my pay for the last month which Monsieur so kindly gave me this evening. That and the five hundred dollars is all that stands between me and the poor-house—and I grow old, Monsieur Jean, I grow old."

"Listen to me," said I. "I shall give you my note for one year, and the sum shall be fifteen hundred dollars. I shall manage to save that much from my allowance when Monsieur sends me to college—though why to college God alone knows! Surely that is a good security for you. I think

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that any Jew would cash my note at a very small discount. I think that any Jew money-lender would give you at least twelve hundred dollars in cash for the note of the heir to Limousin. Is not that true?"

D'Argenteau smiled sadly.

"You do not know these money-lenders," sighed he. "But if you did, you would not suggest such a thing."

I could not believe that he wished to destroy me. I made a gesture and raised my offer.

"Consider two thousand dollars and a year's time, d'Argenteau. I am offering you four dollars for one, and only a year to wait!"

I saw that he was tempted for he started a little and his active little eyes wavered to and fro, but at length he shook his head resolutely.

"A dollar now means perhaps ten times what a dollar will mean at the end of a year."

"What!" cried I warmly. "Is it possible that you are really without money? Have you won nothing from Reynal at the game? Confess, d'Argenteau!"

"Won from Reynal!" he answered, with what seemed to be a very real astonishment. "Won from

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that fox? Monsieur Jean, you do not know what you say! Reynal is the sink into which all of my savings have disappeared. The man is a dragon. He devours money. But go to him, by all means. He will be glad to oblige you with such a small sum as five hundred dollars on almost any terms. For my part, Monsieur Jean, I weep that I am forced to be so hard on you. It is only the most frightful necessity that compels me!"

I saw that the two hypocrites were determined to cast me back and forth and so avoid me, although they had not concerted their stories any too well beforehand. A storm of angry words rose in my throat; but before they were uttered, fear choked them away again. If I annoyed d'Argenteau, he could go straight to Monsieur. Perhaps Monsieur would pay for the truth.

How I sat through dinner that night I can not tell. Monsieur was full of talk about a new thoroughbred which he had bought, a beautiful mare of distinguished blood lines and of which he hoped the greatest things. I listened and smiled and nodded like an automaton. But after dinner, my mother took me apart to her own rooms.

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"Now tell me, my dear," said she. "There is some trouble in your mind. Come, tell me all about it!"

I was not a very brave young man. In another instant I was groaning out the whole story, laying as much blame as possible upon the temptation which the pair of them had put in my way. I had expected that my mother would break into tears—perhaps fall in a faint, and I was ready to support her. Instead, I found that there was more strength in her than in me.

"The traitors, the traitors!" cried she. "If only Monsieur himself is not behind all of this! Or if I had money— if I had money!"

A new terror caught hold on me.

"In the name of God!" I cried to her. "You are the wife of François Limousin! Can not you find at least five hundred wretched dollars?"

"I could not find five, I think," said she calmly. "But there is a way in which I can raise money. Of that I am sure!"

She took my hands.

"Jean, have you any idea of the value of jewels?"

"None in the world."

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"And we have only until the morning."

"Yes. The blow will fall then. That cruel devil d'Argenteau——"

"Hush!" said she. "But there is a pawn-shop in the town. Do you know the place, with the three gilded moons over the door?"

"I do not know it."

"You must go there to-night. It is at the end of the main street, next to the bakery."

"I remember the bakery."

"Ah, and what if Monsieur desires you to wear the very jewels that I pawn?"

She banished that idea with slight gesture.

"What is that?" said she. "What will he do to me compared with what he will do to you? If necessary, I shall pretend to have lost the whole cassette. If he storms—oh, what of that, Jean? If you are safe, I shall laugh at it!"

I, with a coward's selfishness, told myself that she meant what she said.

XII

WE SAT in her room, two foolish children. I can not tell which of us was the younger or the sillier. A big lamp stood at the end of the table and because the evening was warm a window had been left partly open, so that the draft made the flame of the lamp swell and die and its reflection on the richly polished mahogany lengthened and dulled in turn. Before us, my mother placed an inlaid box, long, narrow and deep. It was very ancient. But the inlaid coat-of-arms was still bright. I forget all the chargings; I only remember, in that whirl of excitement, a rampant stag argent on a field gules. I remember the foolish head and the wild eyes of that medieval beast ridiculously pawing the air.

Then our eyes were lost in the treasures of the jewel box. It was very large, as I have said, and it was nearly filled with trays. She took them out and arranged them before us.

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"Ah!" cried I at the first sight of them. "Here is enough to buy another Limousin!"

"Do you think so?" said she, frowning in thought. "But I wonder! Are you sure that you know nothing about the prices of these things?"

"Nothing whatever!"

She picked up a necklace of pearls which lay in her transparent hand like distilled moonshine—moonshine that gleams through a thin silver land-mist.

"What could the value of this be?"

"I could never guess. I should think—a fortune!"

"But there are imitation pearls, Jean. Oh, yes, I have heard of such things. You had better take it, however. And here——" She dropped the necklace into a bag of chamois skin and selected next an unset ruby with mysterious deeps of fire. It filled the whole palm of her hand with red lightnings.

"This, surely, is not a sham!"

"Alas, I can not tell. You must be sure to take enough. For oh, Jean—if you should fail—if Monsieur——"

"Hush!" said I growing stronger as I saw deliv-

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erance before me. "You must not think of it. Only tell me, dear, how you can forgive me?"

She merely looked at me, with such love that my heart ached to think that an angel should have been put upon the earth among men! Now she swept a whole handful of gems into the bag.

"Take these, at least," said she.

I accepted a bag heavy with wealth. The least gem of all and the tiniest pearl in that necklace was worth twice my debt to d'Argenteau, as I had occasion to learn afterward, but when the bag was in my hand and I looked down to it, it seemed impossible that out of this little bag could come my deliverance.

However, I hurried to my room, dressed for riding, and went out to the stable. The groom who was on night duty jumped up and stifled his yawn at once.

"Monsieur?" said he.

"Let me have Prince Charlie," said I. "And quickly, quickly!"

"Monsieur, but Prince Charlie has not been ridden for a fortnight. He is very wild——"

"What is that to me?" said I in anger. "I want a horse under me with legs, to-night!"

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He hurried off; on second thought, I went after him and together we saddled Prince Charlie. He was quiet enough until he smelled the saddle, and then he began to quiver and dance, hungry to be out and away. Before I mounted I looked at the man as I had never looked at another human before, thrusting through his startled eyes, and into his soul.

"You have heard and seen nothing," said I.

His eyes opened a little wider and then he tried to smile.

"Ah, Monsieur Jean! I am discreet!"

It was not he who betrayed me, but as Prince Charlie carried me through the door of the stable, I thought I saw among the trees to the right, near the schooling ground, a tall shadow of a man—Pierre Reynal!

But I must not tell the last of the story first. The road through the estate wound in a leisurely fashion, but there was no leisure in my blood that night. The excitement of Prince Charlie was in me, and my nervousness was making him burn; so I drove him like a winged arrow through a straight short-cut through the woods. We whipped over fences; we plunged through low-branched coverts

with me lying along the working neck of the stallion. We cleared the last barrier and straightened out on the highway which led to the town.

The soft going through the woods had hampered Prince Charlie, but now with firm footing the ring of his gallop was like the roll of heavy musketry. A low moon hung in the west with the wind whipping clouds across its face. The stallion plunged and shied at every shadow, but I had no fear of him, for there was a greater fear within me.

I could not let the Prince fly all the way. After a time, I took him back to a more moderate gate, but still we were driving fast when the stones of the village street clanged under hoof, and I drew up with a clatter before the three gleaming moons of the pawn-shop.

I tethered Prince Charlie and went in past windows crammed with great, foolish-looking jewelry such as would take the eyes of the townsmen on the one hand and fit their purses on the other. At the clatter of the bell, as the door closed behind me, the broker came hobbling from the rear of the shop, and raised the lamp in his hand to see me the better. I scarcely saw his face—only the bright and snaky glitter of his eyes as the lamp was raised past them.

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"And now, Monsieur?" said he in a harsh voice.

"I want five hundred dollars," said I, abrupt with eagerness. "Have you so much money in your place?"

He fumbled at his ragged mustaches and his goat's beard—I suppose to cover his smile.

"Five hundred dollars," said he, "is a great deal of money. A great deal of money, my friend!"

And he shook his head at me.

"One can not but wonder," continued this satyr, "what so young a man can wish to do with so great a sum. But I have various calls. Sometimes one of my dear young friends has simply lost his purse. He tells me his story, for I am the benefactor of youth. And a frank young man gets a smaller rate of interest. Sometimes one of the poor boys has committed a little indiscretion with a girl—and there are consequences. Sometimes it is a matter of a little loss at cards——"

"I have not come to a church, but to a pawnshop," said I, growing very nervous.

The little man smiled. "However," he went on, "a great deal can be managed when there is the proper security—excellent security, Monsieur! What have you there?"

I opened the bag.

"I do not know what you will think of these things," said I, shuddering with anxiety. "But here is one! Is it worth much?"

I took out the first thing my fingers touched—it was a chain of delicately woven gold, which supported an emerald as broad as a man's thumb-nail. The hand of the broker darted out like a bird's claw and scooped up the treasure. It could have purchased his store, all that was in it, and his hope of salvation besides. He held it under the light and I watched the quivering of his fingers. I have no doubt that to him it was a glimpse into Heaven.

"Has it a value?" I asked.

"Ah, well," said he, "imitations all have a value. They are amusing, unless they are as badly done as this."

"Is it an imitation?" I groaned. "Then I shall take it back."

His hand closed hard over it.

"The chain has a price—a small price!" said he hastily. "What else have you to offer?"

I produced a handful of rings from the chamois bag. Each was a gem worthy of a rich man's collec-

tion; I remember in the lot a black opal set with points of golden fire. The broker took them one by one. He drew in his breath as though he were drinking.

"I have made no mistake. You are Monsieur Limousin's son?" said he.

"Of course—of course!" I hastened to answer as he lifted his thoughtful eyes to me.

"I can not say that I am interested in these things," said he. "But as trinkets they have a certain value—a certain small value! Have you anything else?"

"Yes," said I gloomily. "But I suppose that nothing will please you."

I poured the entire contents of the bag on the counter. He surrounded that heap of dazzling wealth with both his arms with a faint moan.

"Ah," I cried. "*This* pleases you!"

"Unfortunately, Monsieur, it is all very poor stuff!"

I was only a child—or a little more; and I groaned: "Then I am lost! But return it to me——"

"Wait!" said he. "I have little time to be

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troubled with trifles, but because you are the son of Monsieur Limousin—as a favor to the family——”

“No! My father must not know of it!” I exclaimed.

He rubbed his scrawny hands together, nodding and grinning.

“Oh, Monsieur, I am not a fool! I am not a fool! I am a man to be trusted! As for these things—give me the bag. I shall put them away—and you will have your five hundred dollars.”

He took those priceless treasures. He began to write out a ticket.

“I can not write out the list of all of these names,” said he. “We will secure the money—let us say on this little ring, shall we not? As a joke between you and me!”

“Very well—whatever you choose. But quickly, Monsieur!”

“Patience! Patience! You will have the money all in due time! Patience!”

His hand trembled and stumbled as he scratched out the ticket of receipt. As for his intention, there is not the slightest doubt of it. He had acknowl-

edged only the receipt of a single gem, although even that little ring was worth twice the value of the five hundred that I was to receive. As for all the rest of the gems in that unlucky chamois bag, he intended that no Limousin should ever have a glimpse of them again.

But here I heard the galloping of a horse in the street.

He lifted his evil head in alarm.

“And what could it be, except a rider?” said he.
“And as for the——”

But here the galloping horse—and it was driving at full speed—came to a halt before the very door of his shop, and the next moment that door was cast wide by the towering form of Monsieur himself!

XIII

AFTER that first glimpse of him, I assure you that such a whirl of black spun before my eyes that he was jumbled with dim outlines of furniture, lamps and the cringing figure of the money-lender.

Monsieur merely said to me: "And how are the manners of that rascal Prince Charlie, Jean? Have they improved?"

Luckily for me he did not wait for an answer. I could not have spoken if an angel of the Lord had come down and stood at my shoulder to give me courage; but Monsieur walked straight past me and towered at the counter.

"What is this?" said he.

The pawn broker cowered.

"A little joke," he gasped to Monsieur. "A little jest between me and Monsieur Limousin——"

The long arm of Monsieur went out and his

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hand seized upon the chamois bag which the wretched Jew had not yet recovered presence of mind enough to put away from him. My father poured the contents upon the counter.

"What was the sum?" he asked at last.

"Monsieur—the point of the jest—the five hundred dollars—"

"And this is your security?"

"The God of my people curse me," moaned the little man, "if I did not intend to return all these things with my own hands to Monsieur in the morning. But—in the hands of so very young a man—and at night—for the sake of Monsieur I felt their safety could be more trusted in the safe of——"

Monsieur turned his back upon that condemned man, saying cheerfully to me: "I think it is time that we started. Is it not?"

We went back to the château through the night with not a word said. Sometimes, I turned my frightened face and watched the big outlines of Monsieur as he rode square-shouldered down the way. Sometimes he murmured pleasantly to his horse. And all the way my terror grew, while with a fumbling brain I strove to construct my story, and

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found nothing to construct. There was no lie on which I could put my hand.

When we reached the stable the groom, with a face like death, came to take the horses. One look at him was sufficient assurance that he had not betrayed me; but now he was to lose his place—and he was a man with a family to care for; he had been more than twenty years with Monsieur.

My father was whistling as we started toward the house, but before we reached it he wheeled on me suddenly and said:

“If you have made up your mind to a story, tell it to me now, Jean! As well tell it to me now!”

“I have nothing to say,” said I.

“Nothing? Well, well, what a limited imagination you have! Or can it be that you are simply a coward?”

He scratched a match and held it up. Behind that quivering tongue of yellow flame, his eyes were bright, like the eyes of an animal. I endured it as long as I could and then put up a hand to shield me.

“Faugh!” breathed Monsieur, and with a snap of his fingers he put out the match.

He went in before me, tossing over his shoulder:

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"You had better go to your mother, first. She will be curious."

I went to her, of course, and when I tapped at her door, it opened to me at once. She was wrapped in a dressing-gown and I could see that she had not gone to bed. She drew me in and closed the door with a guilty quickness behind me.

"You did not get it, Jean!"

"No!"

"Merciful God! And the jewels?"

"Monsieur has them."

I stood before her like a beaten dog, with my eyes at her feet. When her silence made me look up to her face, there was no scorn in it, however; but only pity and terror.

"Does he know everything?" she said.

"I have not told him."

"What shall we do, Jean? Oh, if I were a man! What shall we do?"

"We can only wait," said I.

"We must not fold our hands. There is some way to fight back. Oh, Jean, for my sake think of something."

I went to my room in a trance of despair. I told

myself that I must think of her, plan for her, struggle for her, yet between me and my care for her came the wretched thought of myself.

We rarely know our inner soul, but brood over it as over a pleasant dream, but I, during that night, saw myself and grew sick at heart.

The morning came, miserable, dull, hooded with gray fog. I crept early to the room of d'Argenteau, to tell him that I had failed and that I had not secured the five hundred dollars to repay him.

"Ah, ah, ah!" murmured d'Argenteau, as if the news cut him to the very quick. "How terribly unfortunate this is! How terribly unfortunate!"

"But whatever happens," said I, "it can not be that you will tell Monsieur himself. For you understand that it would be my ruin, d'Argenteau, for the sake of five hundred dollars!"

"I shall promise you at least this," said d'Argenteau. "I shall not speak to Monsieur on this day!"

"But to-morrow, d'Argenteau? If you intend to strike me, strike now; it is the frightful suspense that kills me and that kills my mother also!"

He said with irritation: "Why did you draw her into the thing? Why should she know about

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it? Well, I can only promise that I shall do my best. If only I were a prosperous man—but you know that I am a pauper; and five hundred dollars to a pauper——”

I left him, knowing that nothing could be effected by a further appeal to him. His mind was made up and in the meantime I had only the wretched assurance that I was free until the next day. D'Argenteau left that morning.

Then, like a coward, I thought I could give my mother at least one happy day by telling her a gross lie. I went to her as happily as I could after the departure of d'Argenteau and told her that I was safe; that he had sworn to me that he would not reveal the thing to Monsieur; that I was to have ample time to repay my debt to him. As for the explanation of my presence in the pawn-shop to Monsieur, I would soon be able to think of something effective. At least, Monsieur could not read my mind or guess the truth if I did not confess.

“Do you think he can not?” said my mother with a faint smile.

However, she seemed as ready as a child to close her eyes upon danger and trouble and look upon the

more cheerful face of the situation. We spent every moment of that last day together like a pair of lovers. I paddled her through the limpid shoal waters at the edges of the Limousin River, while she lay among cushions at the bow and watched the rhythm of my laboring strong shoulders with worshipping eyes; or she would look down to her hand which trailed over the side and left a shining furrow in the river; or she would raise her head and smile at the drift of overhanging branches above her. With all the craft which Pierre Reynal had taught me, I made that canoe glide as silently as a wish. There was only the bright flash of the paddle now and again as it was half unsheathed and the sun struck a flare from it.

And I felt, as the canoe moved on in that magic silence, how like a child's was her pure soul; how dreadful was the fate which had given her to Monsieur. But I understood why she could love him and indeed love all who were around her, for there was no consciousness of self in her. If there had been no one around her she would not have existed; but in her fear of others and in her love of others was her whole being.

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When the prow touched the sands, at last, she sighed :

“Why have we not done this before, Jean?”

“We shall do it a thousand times hereafter,” said I, as I helped her to the firm beach. At this she looked up to me, without sorrow, but with much thought in her clear eyes. So a child lifts its head.

“Do you think so, Jean?” said she. “Do you think that we shall have many days together?”

A ghostly sorrow which had lain about the roots of my heart all day now rose in me like a cold mist.

“Why will you speak in such a way?” said I to her.

“Does it seem a little strange?” said she, smiling. “Perhaps it is to you, but I am full of the feeling that I shall never see that delightful river again.”

She looked back across the river.

“Ah, Jean,” said she, “how sad I am that there is not a clear sunset on the water this evening!”

I could not endure it any more. I caught her in my arms and with a trembling in my throat, I begged her not to speak like this again.

“Dear silly boy!” said she, and patted my cheek. But the horror would not down in me, and when we

came to the edge of the woods and looked out on the château, I drew her back.

"We must not go in for a moment," said I.

She looked up at me and then at the great château where the lights were being kindled and the windows were turning into soft rectangles of yellow mist. Some one was playing the piano—perhaps it was Monsieur—it was his strong tumultuous style.

"It *is* lovely, is it not?" said she, smiling on me.

"Do not go in," said I, with an unearthly foreboding swelling in me. "Oh, my dear, I feel that if you go in now—I can not say what I fear. It is as though there were strangers living in the château. As though we had been away from it for many years."

"No, no, Jean!" whispered my mother. "You must not say it; it has been in my mind so many times. But now—it is time to change for dinner. We must not be late. Monsieur detests tardiness."

"Let us stand here, quietly, only until all the lights are kindled. See, there is a breaking of the clouds in the west and a little red and gold comes through."

"Yes! And how it turns the tower windows into flame!"

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"Dear! My dear!" said I, "do you know how tenderly and how sadly I love you, my sweet mother?"

"You are so serious! And why sadly, Jean?"

"Do you not understand?"

She swayed a little toward me; oh, what a flower-like and fragrant thing she was!

"I dare not understand, Jean!"

XIV

MONSIEUR, at dinner, was never so gay and full of charm; he was particularly bent, it seemed, on drawing Reynal into the conversation, and therefore he turned the talk much upon horses; for though Monsieur had learned from experience and books, Pierre Reynal knew them by instinct, and that is the better knowledge. Between them, on this evening, they took us over the jumps and over the flat at a merry rate.

My mother now and again smiled and nodded upon me as though to say: "You see, everything is not so bad; and all will be well!"

What was Monsieur saying?

"That odd fellow, d'Argenteau—was he not odd, my dear Julie? Was he not odd?"

"I presume that he was, François."

"See," said he, waving to my mother in a mock admiration, "is it not noble? She will not admit a shadow or suspicion even toward a departed man!"

Ah, Julie, how little schooling you will need from the angels!"

"This d'Argenteau," said Monsieur, "when he left Reynal at the train gave him a letter which I was requested to leave unopened until to-morrow, but I am a curious fellow—as you know, Julie. I could not resist opening the letter this evening. A queer letter, Julie. A queer letter, Jean. Will you not let me read it aloud to you?"

He pulled it from his pocket and shook out its folds. He was eating olives, so that the reading of the letter required an amazing length of time. I, knowing that the devil was now unleashed, strove to reassure my mother by smiling at her; but she was already tense. As for Reynal, gay or sad, his expression was controlled by the drawing scar which maintained a hideous leer on his face.

"He is a gay rascal!" smiled Monsieur. "Consider this opening:

"My dear Monsieur Limousin:

"One leaves with regret associations which have endured through ten years. No, it is a longer time; but in your company, Monsieur Limousin, one loses consciousness of a great deal except Monsieur Limousin."

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Here my father paused to enjoy another olive.

"What can he mean by that?" asked my mother.

"Have patience, my dear Julie. Perhaps we shall learn in due time."

He spread out the letter before him, and, in so doing, a stir of wind turned down a corner of the sheet so that I could not help seeing that all the letter consisted of was perhaps half a dozen lines scrawled across the paper. My amiable father was merely doing a little improvising before he settled to the actual contents.

He began again:

"And as I leave you, Monsieur, I can not help giving to you in writing a confession which I could not make to you in person before I left the château. Upon my honor, Monsieur, I shall leave you with much sadness. And the confession which I make is that I was never happier than when I was in your house.

"Does this, perhaps, seem odd to you, knowing as you do that a man of culture rarely finds pleasure in the position of a domestic in any household? It was because of the novelty of that household, Monsieur, that it was possible for me to remain in your company during the ten years."

Here he paused again, and took another big ripe olive, nibbling it with much delicacy, and smacking

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his lips a little to get a more pronounced flavor out of it.

"What do you think of this letter so far, Reynal?"

"Why, it is a letter," said Reynal.

"And you, Julie?"

"It seems a very polite note, François. I do not think that Monsieur d'Argenteau is quite as odd as you make him out."

"We are still only in the beginning of this letter, my dear. Let me continue:

"What most entertained me, I can not say, where everything was amusing. In the first place, I was always pleased by the tyranny of Monsieur himself, whether it was politely restrained—or whether it was brutally open, knocking down people right and left."

"François!" broke in my mother.

"Well, my dear child?"

"Is it possible that any man in the world has dared to speak to you in this manner?"

"Write to me, not speak. Be accurate, my dear. However, let us continue:

"But on the whole, Monsieur, I never knew

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whether I was more revolted or entertained by your wicked treatment of Madame Limousin!

"You see, that you do not lack some champions, even dumb ones!"

"It is really impossible—the thing can not be!" said my tormented mother.

"I give you my word, I have not misread a single syllable. It continues in this fashion:

"As for Madame herself, a sheep always makes one think of a wolf, and I have sometimes wondered if the submission of madame to your brutalities was not the cause of the brutalities themselves.

"And what do you think of that for scoundrelly impertinence, Julie?"

"I can not tell what to say," said my poor mother. "It is bewildering to meet with such treatment from one who has been in one's house for ten years!"

"Is it not?" said Monsieur, smiling upon her, while he fumbled in the dish blindly for the largest and the firmest olive. "But to continue:

"There was the delightful Reynal, also. I could not dismiss him without a word. Is he aware that he is a mystery? Is it a clever pose, carefully maintained, or is he simply stupid, like, let us say, madame herself?

“What do you say to that, Reynal?”

But Reynal said nothing. The color in his cheeks did not vary a trifle. Monsieur continued with his improvisation :

“Which brings me to Monsieur Jean. I leave him with regret because he is such a docile pupil. And there are possibilities in him which perhaps you, Monsieur, have overlooked. Let me call to your attention that the quiet rogue is often the effective rascal and that personal courage is not always necessary to a life of crime. I warn you, Monsieur, seriously. And it is to give a body to my warning that I add what follows.”

“I shall not listen!” broke in my mother. “The dastard! The coward, to strike such blows when he is unseen!”

“Was it not cowardly?” smiled Monsieur. “However, I think it is interesting, also. Let me continue:—where was I? Let me see—yes, yes—here it is——

“You are aware, Monsieur, that the use of cards has been forbidden in your house for some time, since the death of your unfortunate elder son.”

I knew, now, that he was reading the letter which had actually been written, and to which he had

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chosen to add such a stinging prologue. I dared not look at my mother. I could only stare fixedly across the table toward the unreadable face of Pierre Reynal.

"I regret to say that Monsieur Jean and I have broken that prohibition and have played for some time recently, until he found himself five hundred dollars in my debt. I mention this with regret, and only because I leave you penniless, or nearly so. And five hundred dollars to me is a very great fortune. Translate it into terms of food and shelter and you will understand me, I am sure.

"Adieu, Monsieur,

"Your obedient servant,

"D'Argenteau."

Long preparation often makes the blow, when it falls, more unendurable. I was tensed to brittleness and this stroke crushed me utterly. My father folded the letter slowly and turned his eyes upon me.

"Rise!" said Monsieur.

I stood up.

"Say one word," said Monsieur. "Say: 'Yes!' or say: 'No!' I am not in a humor to listen to a plea."

"Monsieur——" I began.

A pitiful cry from my mother: "François, will

you not let me tell you how he was tempted and——”

“I do not wish to hear you. I am speaking to your son. You, it seems, knew all about the matter some days ago, and in spite of that knowledge, you kept the word from me, Julie?”

He stood up in turn. How he towered above me! He was in such a mighty rage, and his fury had so grown upon him during his improvisation, that now he was trembling and quaking.

“Speak!” said he.

I could only mutter: “Monsieur, it is true——only——”

“How could you have been so weak, Jean. Even a fool and a coward should have the wits to know that such an estate as mine is worth some temperance. You should have delayed until the château was in your hand, and then you could have sired your true, pitiful, shameful self. You could have indulged your secret vices. You could have filled the château with gamblers, tricksters and cheats. But you were too hasty. You rushed upon your fate too blindly, Jean! Do you know it now?”

His voice swelled to a frightful violence, and he made such a gesture that I shrank away from him

and threw up my hands to shield my face; and as I did so an expression of devilish scorn came into his eyes.

"I have loathed you from your infancy!" he said between his teeth. "I have hated you from your childhood. I have detested your pretty face, your damned girl's voice, your sneaking ways. Oh God, that Hubert Guillaume should have been taken from me and such a thing as *this* left in his place!

"My part in you I renounce for ever. My eye shall never rest on you again. Go quickly!"

I had already withdrawn some paces before his thunder, and now my mother ran in before me. She caught at the raised hand of Monsieur, and clung to it.

"François!" she gasped. "Will you hear me? Will you——"

He brushed her aside, not violently, but the strength seemed to run out of her body and she slipped lightly to the floor. I tried to catch her, but there was nothing firm for my arms to receive. She lay with her eyes closed, whispering: "Mercy—François—" Her voice stopped in a sigh—she was dead.

XV

I RAISED her in my arms. To me at that moment she had no more weight than a form of air and I carried her past the silence of Pierre Reynal, past the white horror of the butler. Monsieur came before me at the door, but I lifted my eyes to him and he stepped back. I carried her under the lofty dome of the stair-well, and past the two armored knights who guarded the first step on either side with their foolish halberds; I passed the stained-glass window on the first landing, and the Italian Madonna on the second. The thick carpet of the second floor turned my steps to a whisper, and with that whisper I entered her room.

Life departs slowly from the newly dead, and her spirit still seemed living in her room. The moon was there before me and falling through the window dropped first on the clustering, transparent petals of a vase full of lilies, then fell along the rug and brought out dimly the Persian design, the Persian

colors. Yonder lay a light wrap thrown over a chair, with its folds dropping gracefully to the floor, and a pair of gilded slippers stood beside it. The air was delicate with the fragrance of the flowers.

I laid her on the bed and turned from her, for it seemed to me that there was more of her in the hushing breeze than in the body which lay behind me. I had a strange illusion that she had at that moment finished dressing, turned down the lamp which burned low like a watching yellow eye from the corner and hurried from the room. She was on the deeply carpeted stairs, now—she was passing the Madonna; the light from the strong lanterns which Monsieur kept burning at night outside the stained-glass windows fell across her and robed her with the wings of a splendid butterfly;—she hurried past the rigid watchers at the bottom of the stairway;—she entered the dining-room——

Ah, and there she found the white-faced butler, the silence of Pierre Reynal, and Monsieur at the door. All the house had fallen into utter silence.

I closed the eyes of my dear mother; I kissed her lips because I could not cover her face without breaking my heart, I drew the curtains around the bed.

It was hard to pass through the door. Twice I attempted to open it, and twice I knew that when the door was closed I, who was still within a step of her, would be an eternity away.

I was weak, nearly fainting, when I stood in the hall at last; but I had a passion inside me which brought back strength. It had flushed me with heat and sent me running to my room. There I tore off my dinner jacket and dressed for the woods. My mind was light and clear. I could name to you now every detail of the clothes which I donned, and how I hesitated for some time between two hunting coats, and how I took high shoes that laced almost to the knee because, as I told myself, they would do either for riding or for walking, and how I selected a strong corduroy hat, a flannel shirt, comfortable gloves.

I could tell you more with microscopic exactness, from the stain on the front of my hunting coat to the metal rim of the eyelet which pulled out as I laced up the shoes with the leather laces; and yet during all that time I was seething with fury and with revolt.

When I was equipped in this fashion, I went

down the stairs and laid my hand on the knob of the dining-room. There I was taken for a moment with a great wonder as I felt that I was no longer afraid of Monsieur! By the time that astonishment had left me, I knew that it would not be wise to enter the room for there were no words which could do me service. And Monsieur had already spoken.

When my back was turned on that door, my courage drained out of me, and I was like one who fled as I slipped down the hall and then into the open night. The tall black trees stood like friends to welcome me, and where the road turned into the woodland, I looked back to the château as one who leaves a strange land behind him. I thought of my mother then with a shudder, as though even her dead body must feel the terror in that unhappy house and tremble at it.

Around the curve of the road I struck into a jog-trot and kept to it for half a mile until I heard the rush of a horse behind me. I was no sooner in the shadow of a tree than Monsieur drove past me on his black horse. He had not paused to put on a hat; his cloak flew wildly behind him and the white face of his shirt gleamed faintly in the starlight. This

was enough warning for me. I kept to the shelter of the trees from that moment and maintained, as I went forward, that frictionless stride of an Indian runner which Reynal had taught me.

The sky darkened as I went on and then the rain began like footsteps and whispers through the trees. Now and then I walked, but through most of the night I still jogged on because I was soon wet to the skin and had to maintain a brisk pace for the sake of warmth. By the time the morning was bright I was well outside of the district around the château with which I was familiar; the rain now fell into a drizzle more chill than before, but by this time, I was too tired to run. I simply plodded mechanically on.

In the mid-morning the woods thinned. From the edge of them I looked across wet meadows to a village. The breakfast fires were dying; only over a dozen houses a thin ghost of smoke lagged to one side and soon was beaten to nothing by the falling mist. How hungry the thin scent of the woodsmoke made me! I felt in my pockets for money and found that I had not taken a penny, but I consoled my empty stomach with the reflection that I could not

dare to show myself so near the château as this. So I drew up my belt another notch and struck on again with easier going, for since I was now at least fifty miles from my starting point, I felt that I might safely trust myself to the less frequented paths or even roads which led north and east. Along this better footing, I swung away quite cheerfully.

South and west a curtain of smoke dropped behind me, but I had walked out of the shadow of the storm into a warm sun. I walked myself dry. Five miles an hour the road unwound behind me and it was more pleasant, while my strength lasted, to keep my legs swinging than to sit down and think of the emptiness of my stomach. My halts were more frequent now, of course, but when I had gone through the day and struggled into the night as far as my strength permitted, I knew that I had put at least another fifty miles between me and the château. Then I turned from the road to a side way which brought me within the glint of far-off lights. I did not go toward them, however, for near me I saw the black pyramid of a shed's roof and smelled sweetness of hay. Into that hay I burrowed and was deeply asleep before all my body was covered.

XVI

THE shed was close to the edge of the trees, and when I came to their border I saw miles of cleared valley spotted with houses and the yellow green of orchards, checked with irregular lines of hedge and stone fence. Cattle browsed in the fields, dim spots of color, and their lowing fell out of the distance as mellow as bells. As I looked at the trim little houses, each with a white pillar of smoke leaning one way above it in the still morning, a door opened in my heart and I felt that I had come home at last. So I hobbled down the hill, wincing when a foot struck a stone, but not at all conscious of the chaff which had worked down my neck, or the burrs in my clothes, or the dried mud and wrinkles of my trousers, or the unshaved beard which darkened my face. All that I really knew was that my feet were sore, my pocket empty and my stomach filled with an active fiend. So the nearest house was the best house for me. I went humbly to the back door and

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rapped, but there was no shame in me. I was much too hungry for that.

The door was jerked open at me by a tall hard woman with an impatient frown. The moment she had scanned me her frown grew more deeply furrowed.

"Well?" said she.

"I am hungry," said I.

"And what of that?" said she.

"I smell the bacon frying," said I.

"You're wrong," said she. "It's all fried and it's about to be eaten, but not by you!"

I slipped my foot against the door as she tried to close it.

"I'll work for it, of course," said I.

"Humph!" said she. "No shame! A nacheral beggar. Hey, Harry!"

"What's up, Sis?" called a man's voice, as nasally American as the woman's.

"Aw, there's a tramp out here that says he's got to have breakfast."

"He's got to have it?" bellowed the man, with the grating of a chair pushed back.

"Sis" eyed me with a malicious satisfaction,

but as the heavy step approached she added in justice: "He says he'll work for it."

She stepped aside and in the doorway appeared a man as gaunt as she but very tall, heavy-boned, and with great gaunt sinewed wrists that spoke of strength. He did not remain in the house but took a hostile step toward me.

"You got to have breakfast?" he asked.

"I think I do," said I.

"Thinking is better than knowing, sometimes," said he. "Where might you of bu'sted out of jail?"

"I haven't been in jail," said I.

"Son," said Harry, "I have been a shack in my day and while I was a shack, heaving hobos off the top of the train when it was on a down-grade was my way of getting exercise. I hate a bo. I hate 'em worse'n I hate a rattlesnake; and the younger they are, the more I hate 'em."

"I am not a tramp," said I.

"Where's your pack?" said he.

"I have no pack," said I.

"But you ain't a tramp?"

"No."

"How do you figger that?"

"I'm ready to work."

"Son," said he, "I'm a patient man, but now you run along and batter some other door. I'm the worst boss in the valley. Them that work for me get long hours and short pay and bum grub and no thanks."

I could have smiled in his face, for after a life with Monsieur, sternness in any other man was scarcely more than a pleasant jest. But before I had a chance to reply to this collected grimness, Sis answered from behind the door:

"What did you say about the grub here, Harry?"

"I said what I said," remarked Harry.

She pushed herself into view. "There ain't a house in the valley feeds better than I do, Harry Martin, and you know it!" she cried: "Besides, I don't believe this young man is a tramp at all!"

"You don't believe it?" asked Harry sarcastically.

"By the make of those clothes!" said Sis, "which they're tailor-fitted. Young man, why ain't you at home with your folks?"

"I have no people," said I.

"Look, Harry," said she, "how you been talkin' to an orphan!"

"All right! all right!" sighed Harry. "What you want to do about it?"

"Feed the poor young man," said she. "Belle, get another plate on to the table."

"I've done it already, Aunt Elizabeth," said a girl's voice.

At this, both Sis and Harry looked rather foolishly on each other, but they took me into the house. While Aunt Elizabeth washed dishes, Belle waited on me. She was a strapping, eighteen-year-old with sorrel hair and much muscular life that showed in the red of her face and her wrists. But even common stock like Belle embarrassed me because I had seen almost nothing of girls. She stood about attempting to open a conversation by saying:

"Would you like some more butter? Could I get you some more corn-bread? I'm afraid that bacon ain't crisp, Mr. ——"

"My name is Smith," said I. "My name is John Smith." But I could hardly lift my eyes to her and my confusion made her quite the mistress of the situation. She even leaned toward me confidentially and whispered: "But John Smith ain't your *real* name!"

"Are you getting foolish about him already, Belle? Get along with you to that churning!"

I was left alone to eat as it is given to few men to eat. Aunt Elizabeth, looking in a moment later, and seeing that the fire had almost swept the table bare, came in and put down before me with a grunt a great black pan more than two-thirds full of corn-bread, together with a pitcher of molasses. Bread and molasses both disappeared in a twinkling.

"Hey, young man," said Sis from the door, where she stood scowling upon me, "it's a shame to use up all that appetite on one meal!"

I pushed back my chair and smiled undaunted upon her, for in spite of her sternness I felt that she was my ally in that house.

"I suppose that you're one of them that mostly get what they want in this here world," said she. "And without no work, neither."

"I don't know," said I. "I haven't been out in the world long enough to find out what my luck is."

She did not regard this remark but went on sternly: "I had a kid brother that was no good. He couldn't even split kindling wood without getting a terrible backache. Well, he married rich. But

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the poor feller, he drunk himself to death. That was how *he* came out! He had the same sort of a calf look that you got."

I merely smiled on her. With that breakfast under my belt I could have smiled at a fire-breathing dragon; and behind her darkening frown, I guessed at a certain warming of her heart.

She said: "Harry is waiting for you outdoors. Don't you mind him. He's just a barking dog!"

"What's your name?" said Harry, when I stepped into the back yard.

"Smith," said I.

"What can you do, Smith?"

"Ride a horse or drive it; hunt,—I might be useful to you hung," I suggested.

He parted his lips on some scorching rejoinder. Then he changed his mind. "Can you pitch hay?"

"Oh, I suppose so!"

"Oh, you do? Ever try?"

"No."

"Hay pitching is an art," said he. "Can you plow, mow, shock, prune, chop, or stack?"

"I can learn," said I, beginning to feel that one would need a college education to work on a farm.

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"You can—hell!" said he. "Well, go tackle that wood-pile and work till you figger that you've earned your breakfast. Then beat it, kid, and don't let me see nothin' but your back again."

I started for the wood-pile. In fact, part of Reynal's woodcraft teachings had to do with the swing of an ax, and when I had laid off my coat and rolled up my sleeves, I attacked the heap of logs. It was not easy work, as I knew from the first chip that I knocked out. It is one thing to sink an ax in soft green timber, and quite another to strike weather-seasoned fire-wood. Moreover, I started too fast at my first day's work; in an hour I was nearly winded, my shoulders and back ached, and my hands were sore and swelling; but I kept desperately at my job, for more than the wood-pile I dreaded the long and hungry road.

I slugged away steadily. As for the pain of hands and body, I merely set that down as the curse of Cain—a bitter curse indeed! Then, after an age of agony, a shadow fell before my feet and the harsh voice of Harry said: "Don't force that ax, kid. Let it use its own weight. Lemme show you!"

I stepped back, glad at least that I was not

instantly ordered to start up the road; but when I passed him the ax, he scowled down at it.

"Show me your hands!" said he.

I extended my puffed and bleeding palms.

"Aw, my God!" said Harry, "is there any damn fool like a young fool? Now I got to keep you lyin' around for a whole week doin' nothing while you get mended! Go take them hands to Sis and tell her to put some iodine on 'em."

Sis, however, regarded my frightful hands with a smiling complacence.

"Don't you mind Harry," said she. "He's mighty glad to have one of your kind but he's ashamed to say so, because it was me that seen that you wasn't a tramp. Whose mother's son are you, boy?"

My sore hands did not keep me from work, however. If I could not hold ax or grip pitchfork handle, I could at least learn to milk, and this part of my education, which occupied all of the next ten days, was devoted to the cows under the tuition of that capable-handed Belle. She worked patiently over me.

"It's just a trick," said she, when I was unable

to make the milk flow. "You see?" And taking my place on the stool she would set the rhythmic streams churning and foaming into the pail. "It's just a trick like anything—like pitching hay or like learning to dance. Can you dance?"

"Just a little," said I.

"Well, I'll teach you," said she. "These dances they have around here ain't like the good times out West, though. Start at nine out there, and keep going till sunrise. But, oh my, the next day, it was terrible, when you lay down the flies wouldn't let you sleep!"

But I managed to avoid the dances and live my own quiet life, which consisted of hard farm work all of every day, an hour of reading in my bed at night, ten seconds of drowsy day-dreaming, and then a long heavy sleep until the crashing voice of Harry burst through the house the next morning: "Tumble out, all hands! Tumble out! This ain't a holiday. Look alive!"

Harry Martin paid me thirty dollars a month, which was about fifty per cent. less than I should have received, but although I could have changed to almost any other farm in the valley as soon as I

had established a reputation for steadiness, I could not make up my mind to leave my first employer. His niece, Belle, and even his sister could not keep from pointing out my blindness to me and both of them urged me to strike Harry for a raise, but I could never summon enough courage to do it. I think it was this weakness on my part that first made them despise me; this together with the extreme quietness of my life. My amusement was reading; my only extravagance was the buying of books now and then.

“Aw, he’s just a tightwad!” I once heard Belle explaining to her aunt in the kitchen.

She had had little use for me from the moment it was learned that I could not be persuaded to go to the dances. “Why not?” she had said to me at last. “The other boys ain’t going to hurt you, if that’s what the trouble is!” But even this taunt could not rouse my sleeping spirit and she gave me up in deep contempt.

I had few plans for the future, during this time. It was enough for me to taste perfect freedom, and the joy of a life without Monsieur; and this gave me such a deep content that days and weeks and

months flew by me, and the autumn turned to winter, and through the winter I rejoiced in my new-found hardihood which enabled me to laugh at the bitter cold. Then came the spring, and the outrush of green life across the valley, the sweet flooding of the blossoms, the heading out of the hay, and at last the haying season itself. It was at that time, when Harry Martin was hiring extra hands for the gathering of the crop, that I came in from my work in the field and as I washed at the pump I heard him quizzing a man in the kitchen.

"I've seen you before up here, haven't I?" asked Harry. "I seen you on the road last fall, I guess?"

"Perhaps you did," said the other, and his voice transfixed me, for it was Pierre Reynal.

XVII

I THOUGHT at first of plunging straight for the forest, but two things dissuaded me. The first was a sense of helplessness, for if Reynal had been seen in this community the autumn before, it meant that he had known of my whereabouts since that time at least, and had only delayed coming to pick me up at his own pleasure—or rather, at the pleasure of Monsieur.

But the second reason I did not flee—and I think that I may honestly call it the chief reason, was that I felt my body clothed with a new strength, supple tough sheetings of muscle that quivered along my breast and back when I thought of Pierre Reynal. A similar strength, I was sure, had been added to my soul also, and if Reynal had seen me last as a boy, I believed that he would find in me now a calm and assured manhood. So I stood my ground, partly frightened, and in part full of pleasant excitement.

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"Well," said the nasal voice of Harry, "I'll try you. Go out and wash up for supper. There's John Smith out there now. He'll tell you about things."

So Pierre Reynal came out to me.

The rascal came up to me with a grave face.

"Harry Martin says that you are to show me around, Smith. I am a new hand for the haying. My name is Peter Reynolds."

He went on to the pump and stroked out a basin of water in which he was soon blowing and puffing like a porpoise in true farm style—which means that the front of the face and the forelock are thoroughly drenched, while all the vital neighborhood of the ears goes free of care. We could hear the harsh voice of Harry Martin through the screen kitchen door.

"This new man ain't going to make Belle lose no sleep like John Smith and his pretty face done for a while. He ain't made with no special care. He's a sort of Saturday afternoon job."

I looked curiously toward Reynal and I saw his neck grow pink—he had buried his face ostentatiously in the runner-towel. This made me smile;

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and surely it was odd that a person as manly and broad of mind as Reynal was in many ways, should have been so tender on the subject of his ugly face. He said through the folds of the towel, as he brisked them over his face: "Do not be alarmed, Monsieur Jean, for I have come to you as a friend!"

I was overjoyed by the calm in which I could listen to him and hunt for his eye, rather than avoid it.

"I am not alarmed," said I coldly. "But why are you here?"

He seemed in no haste to reply, but with his hands on his hips, he looked up to the dark rising of the trees above us.

"This is a very snug corner, Monsieur Jean," said he.

"Reynal," said I, "I wait for your message."

"It is from Monsieur."

"Very good. Has he not said enough? Did he forget certain ways of damning me which he wished to send by your mouth?"

"Monsieur has sent to beg you to return to him."

I was sure that, as always, my father could not mean what he said. Yet I was astonished.

"He has sent for me?" I repeated vaguely.
"Monsieur?"

"Yes."

"On what peculiar conditions, Reynal?"

"He has made no conditions. He has sent by me to beg you to return."

"That is a likely story," said I. "And particularly likely that you would have come for me even if he sent you. Do you think I have been blind to you, Reynal? Do you think that I have not seen that you hate me and hunt me down? Do you dream that I am not fully aware that you, Reynal, played into the hand of that rat, d'Argenteau—or he into yours, which is more likely—to drive me from the château? And by the same token, it is you who have helped at the murder of my mother!"

My fury took me by the throat.

"Ah, you devil!" I cried. "If you have come like a man to fight as a man should fight—then I welcome you, Reynal. Here are the woods!"

"It is very likely," said Reynal gravely. "But I shall never fight with you, Monsieur Jean."

I struck him across the face with the flat of my left hand, but though he staggered under the blow,

he merely raised his hand to wipe a drop of blood from his mouth.

"That," said he, "cancels part of my debt to you, but not all of it. For I confess that I have been guilty."

"Will you tell me what has made you hate me? Unless you saw from the first that I loathed your ugly face!"

He answered with a gentleness which shamed me in spite of myself.

"It is the curse which I bear. There was a time when I thought you had outgrown that horror of me."

"You admit you have conspired against me?"

"I admit it."

"That it was your scheme to drive me out of the house of my father?"

"I admit it."

"That my mother has died as one result of your devilish work?"

"May God forgive me!"

"And having admitted all of this, do you expect me to trust you, Reynal, and return to my father with you?"

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"I have brought his letter to you."

I took it. It was short but truly from Monsieur:

"Dear Jean,

"The devil who uses me as a dwelling place has done a bad bit of work, my son. I do not extenuate, Jean. But I ask you to come back to me and let me prove that I understand you are a Limousin.

"This is from a lonely man,
"François Albert Limousin."

I crumpled the letter.

"Is there no answer, then, Monsieur Jean?"

"What answer should I send?"

"Monsieur Jean," came the surprising reply, "I have not attempted to persuade you. I have repeated, merely, the words of Monsieur!"

There was enough implied in this remark to make me wonder at that grotesque more than ever.

"You take me back to the days of my childhood," said I. "I begin to gape at you again. But when you return to Monsieur, tell him that I hope a curse will——"

"Do you speak of your father?"

I felt the justice of that rebuff.

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"I am ashamed," I admitted to Reynal. "But you may tell him that my days with him at the château are part of a bad dream. I have been crouching in corners; by the Eternal God, now I am my own man!"

He said: "You have been, in the past, only the son of your mother. Now you are only the son of Monsieur. It was his son's hand that struck me."

I could not answer him at once. It was such a thing that the truth of it came slowly home to me. Truth strikes like a hand upon a bell; and the certainty that Reynal was right now went ringing through me. That thing which I had loathed in Monsieur and fled from, I had taken with me.

The moon walked slowly up through the eastern trees while I pondered this unpleasant thing; then the shrill voice of Sis called to supper.

"Reynal," said I as we went in, "I have no doubt that Monsieur has paid you well for trailing me and spying on me."

"Upon my honor, I have left the service of Monsieur!"

"Upon *your* honor, Reynal?"

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"I am sorry," said Reynal, and looked humbly down to the ground.

"What a hypocrite, what a stupid hypocrite you are!" said I.

He made no answer and what seemed so gross a mock-humility made me break out at him again.

"Monsieur Reynal, Monsieur Liar, Monsieur Devil, I tell you that you are unwise to hound me, for perhaps I have become dangerous, and if the time should come, there is something in me now that will not let me miss the mark!"

"It is the soul of Monsieur," said Reynal.

I could not answer him. We passed in for supper together and in a deep silence.

The family regarded Pierre with much curiosity, but silence is a familiar and respected thing among western Americans and I could tell that they were favorably impressed by his grave quiet. Harry even went so far as to say: "I think you'll do pretty well here. If you get along with Smith. And that's easy to manage."

"It ain't so easy to keep from scaring John," put in Belle. I think that from despising me for my unmanly backwardness, she had come to hate me.

As she delivered this cut to me I glanced aside at the face of my tutor in the arts of manliness, but he did not seem to understand.

Afterward, however, when he accompanied me to the barn to feed and bed down Harry's driving horse which had been to town that afternoon, Pierre touched my shoulder and asked me to stop.

"It is this," said he; "if you stay here, Monsieur will surely find you."

"And then?" said I.

"You will be damned," he answered.

"Kind Reynal! How much you care for me! I tell you that all fear of him has left me."

"You have become a man," said Pierre—what a tribute was that!—"but he is Monsieur."

I told Reynal that I should see my father if he came.

"But," I asked him, "how do you profit even if I run away?"

He gave me a strange weary look at that, but he would not answer for a time. When he did speak, it was a thing that startled me. "Monsieur Jean, I have enough money in the bank. Will you take what you need to carry you wherever you wish

to go? London or Rome—I've heard you sigh for those cities. I don't speak of a few hundreds; I have more than fifteen thousand in the bank."

It was a bewildering speech, but I told myself that the trick must be there, even if it were so well hidden that I could not see it. I answered him obliquely:

"You've saved all of that money since I left the château?"

"What good would it have done if I had given you what you needed for d'Argenteau?" he asked me. "You would never have left Limousin!"

I was thoroughly baffled and I loathed that ugly face too thoroughly to attempt to understand. I turned my back on Pierre Reynal and walked away.

XVIII

IT WAS three days or four days after that; I can not remember the exact time, for after the coming of Reynal, every day was a nightmare of waiting for him who was sure to come after. Reynal, in the meantime, had become to all appearances a cheerful farm laborer, much valued by Harry, and respected for his silence and his terrific ugliness by the women. So much respected that he was in the kitchen that evening, his opinion on the purchase of a mowing machine being desired by Harry. It was Belle who came running up the stairs and knocked at my door. I knew by that that something unusual was in the air, for she would have shouted her message from without, ordinarily. When I opened the door I could not see her face but I could hear the breathing of her awe in the darkness.

“Somebody wants to come up to see you—and he’s a swell—and he sent up to ask—for permission!”

She brought out the last with a gasp. Then:
"Who is he, John?"

I grew a little dizzy; I had waited for the battle so long that now the first sound of the guns, so to speak, sickened me.

"And who are you?" cried the girl softly.

I asked her briefly to bring him up, and she was so impressed that she did not stay for more questions. Down she went with a great rattling and crashing and almost immediately I heard the quick light step of Monsieur—too light for his bulk and for his age. Yes, and he came humming an air! In vain I told myself that I was of age and my own master; the old fear of him was like a fog in my face. I was on the far side of the room, with my arms folded, as he came in. I could not help realizing that my pose was that of a young hero in a play. "Reynal has brought you at last?" I said to him in place of a greeting.

Monsieur, closing the door behind him, raised his hand. "Justice, Jean; justice!" said he. "Reynal has had nothing to do with it."

"Your word, Monsieur, puts it past argument."

I could tell by his faint smile that he was im-

mensely pleased with himself, and his eyes were shining like a boy's. Indeed, I have never seen a man on whom fifty years and more sat so lightly.

"Courtesy, courtesy, my son," he murmured. "Courtesy is the thing, always! You must not forget the good training of Monsieur d'Argenteau."

I dropped my hands into my pockets and looked him up and down. I was full of my own strength; full of confidence; full of the bitterest hatred for him; and yet how frightfully difficult it was to meet that bold black eye!

"You have come here for some purpose," I said bluntly, at last.

"You are deliciously logical, Jean," he agreed, and he drew in his breath through his teeth as he smiled at me. He had taken the only comfortable chair, and now he stripped off his gloves leisurely. One would have thought that he realized my growing tension as he looked about him with a sort of cheerful curiosity.

"How well you have done it!" said he. "How well you have managed this affair of the room. Plain but not too barren; neat but without too much polish. An attic taste, dear boy."

Said I, "And now, Monsieur?"

"Will you sit down?"

He pushed forward a stool to me with such an air that suddenly he became the host and I the interloper. I felt that I should have to do something quickly, and find some means of putting myself in motion; to remain quiet was to allow the tremendous incubus of his will to settle down upon my spirit and crush me utterly. Yet, abstractedly, I took the stool and sat uneasily upon it.

"You have changed, Jean," said he in his gentlest voice—and how insinuatingly soft it could be. "Yes, you have changed. Let us have more light!"

With this he pushed the lantern a little forward on the table so that the glow fell strongly upon me and left him more securely in the shadow; it was a trick which I understood at once, but though I felt the pressure of that light like the burden of a thousand eyes I was helpless against it. I could not with any dignity restore the lantern to its former place.

"Changed from a boy," he continued, "and now I find you a man! Ah, that is often a sad time for a parent, but not for me!"

My rage at this silken hypocrisy made me cry: "Do you not understand that it is all clear to me? I know that you have always hated me. Come, let us be frank and breathe the pure air. It is better!"

"Yes," said he with a gesture of his open hand, "you are right, Jean. And that is why I have come to you to-night—to lay my soul bare before you! And then to ask your forgiveness."

In spite of the years of knowing and dreading him, in spite of my certainty that this was all consummate sham, yet at this touch of sorrow in his voice and this suggestion of resignation in his face, half of my strength left me and emotion filled my throat. I felt that my only hope lay in closing my ears to his voice; yet how could I do it?

He continued: "It was because I did not understand you, and the qualities which I loved in your dear mother——"

My head went back.

"Forgive me?" said he, leaning a little forward. "When I saw them in you, I thought that you were not a man. Am I not to be pitied a little? Pitied for my very brutality, my blindness? It was only by losing you that I could come to know you!"

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Then I groaned: "Do not speak of me—but of her! Of her! For myself I forgive everything—it is not worth a gesture. But for her?"

Said he: "As truly as though I had taken a club in my hand, I struck her to my feet and killed her!"

That dreadful picture came blindingly upon me, and I pressed my hands across my face. Yet his voice, like a sweet soft organ music, ran in upon my soul.

"And for that I am damned forever! Shall I tell you how her sad and gentle face looks in upon me in the black of the night——"

I had never wept for her, and now the tears came up in a fresh anguish from my heart; I closed my teeth against a sob, but it broke from me; I cried like a helpless woman.

It was the hand of Monsieur on my shoulder, and his deep voice at my ear that called me back to myself:

"Then you will understand, that even out of me a little good might grow. Something from her lives in me and will never let me rest until I have redeemed myself with you. Now my proper future

has been revealed to me. It is my mission, often by evil methods to create wealth and power and then pour it into your hands. You will use it only for the purest good when I am gone. God meant us for a partnership. I burn with it! I have been in agony to find you. But tell me that you may learn to forgive me, my son!"

I had turned weak as water; the very sound of his voice shook me, and though I submitted to him, it was not to him only but more to the thought of my poor mother which filled the room like a fragrance from a grave. I shielded my stinging eyes from the light, and looking down, I answered: "Ah, Monsieur, I have no power against you. I can not forget that you are my father. Do not ask me to forgive you; it is done already!"

He stood behind me but the sudden grip of his hands passed a tremor through me.

"This is a golden day for me!" said he. "I shall not dwell upon it too much, or else I should be unnerved, but it means that a spirit comes back into my life. Ah, when I have you back with me—a man—what will we not do together? There has been only one Limousin; and yet the world has felt

me! But now there are two. Shall I tell you the first great scheme which came to me for building up your strength?"

I hardly heard him for I was carrying my warm light burden through the hall, and between the two forms in armor, and past the sad Madonna——

"A scheme beautiful in its simplicity—worthy of myself, in fact—and its execution means the addition of the Gerardin estate to ours. I tell you this to let you see that you will be coming back to a life of keen activity—not to a drowsy manor—when you return to me."

"Return, Monsieur?"

"Is it not settled?"

He stepped out of his harangue and stood in front of me, perhaps so that he could watch my face or else so that I might see in his the strain and the pallor of his anxiety. Yes, even at that moment I had wit enough to know that this was acting in all probability. And yet I could not help seeing, also, that if he had hated me always, there was no real reason why he should beg me to return, except for the really futile pleasure of tormenting me. If he hated me, why should he wish me back? But

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if he loved me—ah, to one who had not known a father in twenty-one years, that hope was a golden thing; and at last, what with the dread and the doubt in my mind and the yearning in my heart, I gave up the battle in a sudden weakness. I took one of his cool strong hands in both of mine.

“Ah, Monsieur,” said I, “if you are playing a new rôle, merely, and taking me back for a purpose, believe me when I say that it will turn Limousin into a hell for me—and for you also! But if it is because there is the least tenderness for me in your mind—then I shall forget everything. My whole heart shall be yours!”

“Now God be praised,” said he in a broken voice. “My dear son!” and he turned suddenly to hide his face.

As for me, it was the opening of the door to Heaven. I hardly remember what was said after that, except that Monsieur was walking up and down the little room with me and that I was clutching his thick arm, trying to realize him, and my happiness. I know he told me that I must return alone, because people should not think that he had been forced to go out and fetch me. He was to

go at once, and I on the next day. He put money on the table; I must have clothes, he said. Then he took me in his arms and he was gone.

I was thrusting aimlessly at the embers in the stove when Pierre Reynal came in. "Monsieur Jean," said he from the door.

"My father and I are joined again!" said I.

A wild cry from Reynal—and there was the stoic, the Roman, turned white and clutching at his breast like a dramatic actor in a death scene.

"You return to the château, Monsieur Jean!"

"Where else?" said I, gaping feebly on him.

There was such a groan from Pierre Reynal as tore the heart.

"Is it true?" said he. "Then Christ is against me!" And he rushed down the stairs.

XIX

MY LEAVING of Harry Martin was more pleasant than my coming. When I came down in the morning, I was told that Pierre Reynal had disappeared; of course it was what I expected. "And now," said Harry, scowling at me, "you are going, too! Well, you'll hold it against me, but how could I know that you were Jean Limousin. Even if I did know that you were something more than John Smith. I knew that when you were too good to take Belle to any of the dances."

I simply told him, with a heartiness that made him gape, that I had been happy in his house. He did not remind me to take my wages when I departed. The next day, in new clothes, conscious of hard hands and a brown face, I was in Limousin.

I saw at once what it was to be the son of Monsieur. There was a buzz as though a prince had arrived. I walked down the street and paused at the old pawnbroker's shop: The sign still hung

there, but the windows were a blank, the place was empty. The hand of Monsieur had been there before me! I accepted it as a token and went on more gloomily than before, full of thought for that evil little man who had so nearly taken advantage of my innocence less than a year before. In what manner, then, had Monsieur struck him? To whom had he turned when the blow fell? Had he submitted as to destiny which is inescapable? Or had he fought like a desperate cornered rat? Who had felt the loss with him—what children? What wife? What ancient mother or father? What dependent brother? Or was it only some one who cooked his meals? But as for the little Jew himself, I had no doubt. Where Monsieur struck, he was sure to strike heavily and after the falling of the blow there would be nothing left of such a miserable victim.

And from thinking of the Jew, I turned to thoughts of myself and trembled. Yet I had some measure of confidence in my new strength. If not strength against Monsieur, wisdom at least to see through him. By the time I had finished computing how much my absence had taught me, I was in

higher spirits and I hired a carriage to drive me to the château.

The coachman was too much impressed to ask questions, but when we passed others on the road he could not resist straightening on his seat and tilting his whip over his shoulder a little to call attention to me; and when the strangers had passed he always turned and gave me a joyous grin as if to say: "You see that they notice!"

At twenty-one, anything that seems to make us important can hardly be called ridiculous. I loved that old man for his folly and when we reached the château, I gave him a bill of such a size that he took off his hat and followed me a step or two to swear that God would be good to me.

I took that as an omen, too—so far was I reduced by the thought of confronting my father again! It was the early evening of that lovely spring day as I stood before the big house and looked to the side of the fine maples which rose over the grave of Hubert Guillaume. The leaves on them were just beginning and through their rosy mist I looked down the avenue which had been cloven through the woods to the waters of the

Limousin River, now coppered over by the sunset colors. As I stood there gazing, somehow I knew that this was the place where I must work out my destiny.

Old Guilbert opened the door and gasped at the sight of me. He wanted to smile and was afraid to (how could they tell how Monsieur would greet the returned prodigal?); he wanted to give me a greeting but scarcely knew an appropriate turn of words, so he ended by choking once or twice and taking me to the drawing-room. In half a minute Monsieur himself was coming. By the faint trembling of the chandelier and the ghostly clinking of its pyramid of glass I knew that the step in the hall was his.

He entered with both hands outstretched; he reached me and raised me out of the chair, before I had time to rise; he embraced me. Name of God! how could one forecast the doings of that strange man? I expected him to regard me as a hired servant rather than as a son; instead, he treated me like a visiting prince.

"Jean, dear Jean! My heart leaps to see you. What? Are you pale and have you lost your

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tongue? Well, dear lad, be thoughtful to-morrow. But to-night let me have the pure joy of welcoming my son to his house!"

It would have been stupid merely to say: "This is not real!" Who can scorn the great actor who makes Lear rave and die because, in fact, he is not Lear at all?

The art of Monsieur carried a lesser soul like myself before it; he swept me away on a wave of enthusiasm as he led me in person to my room. He carried me with him around that room and pointed out everything that had been done to make me welcome. He showed me the white blossoms of potted narcissus which bloomed in the open window. He showed me the gorgeous hangings for the old four-posted bed; old hangings which he had bought for me—God knows at what a price! He showed me a closet full of racks of guns.

"You may murder all the wild birds and beasts in the woods, Jean!"

He showed me, last of all, his own special treasure. We paused before it while he explained.

"It is my own Rembrandt. Those who will not admit that it is a Rembrandt are simply afflicted with

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a jaundice. You know that it has always hung in my own room; it has been the apple of my eye! But when I looked on it last night, when I considered that handsome face under the shadow of that rich cap, and the eager eyes of the young painter looking up from his work to his model, and the grip of that hand on the top of the drawing board, and the other hand so poised—do you see?—to make the next line and strike in the whole character of the face at a sweep—and when I saw the sensitive compressed lips of the youngster—by the gracious Lord, I told myself that it was you! And it should hang in your room, where so many of my thoughts are to be from this day to the end of my life. My happy thoughts, Jean, for all my happiness is to be built upon yours!”

Such were the words of Monsieur. And I say again that if I had not tingled with the joy of them, if I had not felt my heart swell, I should have been a poor clay model of a man not fit to sit in a theater and enjoy the greatest of all arts. Yes, I have no doubt that at that moment he *was* a mere boy. He forgot that he was behind footlights. He was living and breathing in the part. He was devoting himself to this fine effort of his imagination.

Or, perhaps, was it more than imagination? Could he have felt some sincere rapture in taking his son back to his home? Ah, well, that I could not tell and that I shall never know until this head of mine, so powdered with the silver of time, has come down to the grave. There let me lie, my bones beside his bones, while our spirits stand face to face in that other world and damn or save each other by the testimony which only we have the power to give.

I could not know then how much sincerity went with him; but there was enough hope in me to raise my spirits as high as the clouds. To hate Monsieur—that was a soul-filling occupation, indeed! But if it were possible that I could learn to love him, then earth would have been changed to a heaven!

He took me down-stairs again; he sent for the butler and bade every domestic in the house be called, and as people gathered, a short broad-shouldered young man with a gloomy earnest face came. He was introduced as the new secretary, Lafitte. He acknowledged me in a stiff-necked way, without a smile—as one who will not bend the knee to position.

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"Where is Reynal?" I asked my father.

"Reynal has a new position. He is my chief huntsman. In your ear, Jean. I know that you do not love Reynal, and I could not keep him in the house in such an intimate position when you came back to me."

Now Monsieur bade that all the men from the stables and all the gardeners and all the servants who were enrolled in the huge lists of the château, be called in one group. They gathered about the front veranda and then he had the great hanging lamps of the porch lighted and brought me out with him under that white flare of light. I saw the faces tilt up in a pale blur out of the shadows of the twilight and heard an excited murmur run among them.

"Good people," said Monsieur, coming forward with his arm around me, "we have come to a happy holiday. There is no work for you to-morrow. There is no work the day after. The cellars of the château are too crowded, my friends. They must be opened to you, and do not fear to call for the old as well as the new. If I see a sober face by the morning, I shall consider that that man hates the

name of Limousin. And when you drink, remember the name of my dear son who has come back to me!"

They raised a cheer which would have done credit to a regiment of beef-eating Englishmen, and Monsieur took me back into the house. There we sat together drinking old red Burgundy wines which glided through my veins and spread a rich content through my veins. And he talked of hunting; and of a new Australian wheat which he was planting; and of an Irish hunter which winged its way over fences half as high as the moon; and of how the deer throve in the preserve; and of how the trout rose in the brooks; and of how old Guilbert had come running, gasping, stammering to him with the word:

"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean! He is returned! In his own flesh, Monsieur!"

XX

BY THE morning two-thirds of that vision had dissipated. With the rosy cloud of wine rolled back from my mind, I could find reasons for everything. This enthusiastic welcome and that touching little address to the servants; it was spoken only in order that they, with tongues well-loosened with wine, might run to the village that night and the next day and tell every one that they had seen the truth at last—that Monsieur did not hate his son but loved him dearly and that if there were any fault it was that of the young man, but never of his good father who had granted this joyous holiday, so well-moistened.

I say that I considered all of these things as any man of sense, no matter how young, must have done. And when I went down to breakfast, I paused at the door of my mother's room and tried the knob with a heavy heart. It was locked, and for that I felt a melancholy gratitude to Monsieur.

Yes, and beyond that gratitude there was the bright-faced hope that perhaps a little honesty lay beneath all the skilful acting and inspired it. When I met Monsieur in the breakfast-room, he was as cheerful as ever, and he gave me a quieter yet more sincere welcome, I felt.

Studying him in the morning light, which is the most trying light of all, what I wondered over was the striking youth of my father. It is not seldom that one meets a man with a youthful face and an old body, or a trim athletic body and features deeply incised by time; but Monsieur despite all his bulk looked as though he could give a very good account of himself in a cross-country run. His skin was as clear as a baby's, and his eye was full and wonderfully bright. As I grew older, he seemed to step back into youth more and more. I had an absurd uncomfortable feeling that I soon must be the more age-marked of the two.

"*Peste!*" said Monsieur with a sudden violence. "I have not told you that Antoinette is coming this afternoon."

"Antoinette?" said I.

"A charming girl, I am told. Eighteen, fresh

as a rose. I have not seen her but the report is universal. Antoinette Gerardin; it is through a marriage with her that I plan to link the Gerardin estate with ours and so give you a truly princely heritage, Jean."

All the doors of my suspicion flew open as I thought I saw the truth.

"I am to be married to her, then?" I asked with a forced quiet.

"You, my boy? You? Sacrifice you? Alas, the ghost of your mother would rise to taunt me if I subjected you to a marriage of convenience. No, dear lad. But here I am past fifty. What I do with the narrow remnant of my life really does not matter. For your sake would I not make a greater sacrifice than this? Ah, yes, and far greater? Besides, since she is only eighteen, she will be capable of discipline. Yes, there is little doubt that she will be absorbed easily into our domestic arrangements."

He had talked on, deliberately, of course, until my first astonishment and anger had been swallowed. By the time he had ended, I was too full of thoughts to break in upon him. I merely listened,

down-headed, as he went on. Some relation, I was sure, existed between this marriage scheme and my recall to the château. But why I was necessary I could not tell. So I listened and heard him run on with the details. He had persuaded the aunt and guardian of Antoinette to come with her niece to Limousin for a brief visit; before they left it was the hope of Monsieur that he could persuade them to consent to an instant marriage.

I ventured an exclamation of protest at last but he said:

“You would not have me make such a sacrifice for the sake of your inheritance, but I tell you, dear Jean, that this is only an earnest of what I have in mind to do for you to make you great!”

After that how could I tell him that it was the girl of whom I thought?

As breakfast ended, Monsieur asked me what I wished to do and when I told him that I intended to take a ride over the premises, he could not mask his relief. Entertaining his son was not my father's idea of a happy time. So after breakfast I got a horse from the stable—Master McCurdy—and started off through the woods.

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How many acres belonged to Monsieur I do not to this day know accurately; but I rode hard until noon brought me back to the Château Limousin, weaving along forest paths, sweeping along the broad-backed hills, or striding big over the broad valley lands and never once in that ride was I off the estate; and only twice did I skirt the huge stone wall which marked the boundary. I came back very proud of my inheritance and then went to the château to prepare for the ordeal of the afternoon.

I remember that the old clock in the hall was beating out four with a deep voice when I heard the wheels of a carriage crunching the gravel of the driveway; then, through my open door, I could hear the faint tinkle of feminine voices mixed with the large tones of Monsieur; an instant later some one appeared to tell me that they were come and I could properly go down to them. I mustered my facial expression on the way and prepared my picture of them. Mademoiselle Marcia Gerardin was an old maid of an indeterminate age between forty and fifty—which one could take to mean fifty at least; she was probably sour, thin, polite, re-

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served; and as for her niece, I had partly gathered from what Monsieur had said—though he had never seen her—that she was an undistinguished little country girl. By this time she probably sat in a frightened hush, contemplating the Château Limousin and the stern and famous master of the house. But I think I can say, honestly, that beforehand I felt for the girl more pity than curiosity. As for the aunt, she was doubtless a beast—selling a helpless child to an ogre.

But when I came in to them, I found all my preconceptions beaten to the ground! My first thought was that Monsieur had again deceived me. My second belief was that he himself probably had not guessed!

My first shock was before I reached the door of the room, hearing a woman—it was Mademoiselle Marcia, because it could not be the girl—saying in English without a trace of French accent:

“—But that frightful brute stretched out his long neck and took the reins out of my hands. He took me through the forest like a devil with wings and when the sunlight smashed in my face on the far side of the trees I was too bewildered to take

my bearings, at once—and then I saw the hounds not fifty strides away with the fox wearying just in front of them, with its tail down—and not another rider in sight! That, Monsieur Limousin, was the only time I was in at the kill, and that was how I got there. As a rule, the third or fourth fence finishes me. I was built for rolling off a saddle, not for sitting in one; and if God had not furnished these bones of mine with such a comfortable padding they would all have broken long ago!”

With this, she broke into a great laughter, in the midst of which I came through the door of the room and had my first view of her.

XXI

SHE was made to fit her voice, this Marcia Gardin. That is to say, her voice was clearly feminine but it was strong, big, dominant. It was such a voice as makes others raise their own speaking tones until a room is full of clamor. She stood by the window with one hand jauntily on her hip—a big strong hand; and she had wide shoulders that would have done credit to most men, and a broad, brown outdoors face. Yet in spite of her masculine way and her assurance, in spite of the bigness of her voice, I knew at once that she was a lady. She came forward a little to meet me—half-way, as you might say! Monsieur was murmuring an introduction but she drowned him out.

“Come here to the window, young man,” said she. “I’ve grown as near-sighted as a bat, and I want to see every bit of you. Ah, Jean Limousin, are you the pale, romantic young creature we have heard of? Brown as a berry! It seems to me that

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you are simply a very nice, good-looking boy. Does it not seem so, Monsieur Limousin? Does it not seem so, Antoinette? And yet how much he has made us talk about him for a year!"

As a rule a youngster hates to be dragged into view, robbed of his dignity, like a prize dog. But she was so entirely unaffected and so good-natured that I could smile back at her without the slightest malice; and then I went to Antoinette Gerardin.

If I say that the reality of Mademoiselle Marcia reversed all my preconceptions of what she must be, Antoinette was still more a surprise to me. She was a beauty of a southland type, with an Italian skin, olive-stained, and very large, very black eyes. I should say that in passing from Mademoiselle Gerardin to Mademoiselle Antoinette I was passing from boisterous wind and blazing sun into shadow. This girl spoke quietly to me, but with a faint smile at her aunt, as though to intimate that she enjoyed the enthusiasm of Mademoiselle Marcia even while she was amused by it. That smile told me that they were excellent good friends; that there was a brain behind the dark eyes of Monsieur's future wife; that for all the noise and the stir of Aunt Marcia, An-

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toinette was doubtless the stronger soul. I gathered from that first instant with Antoinette another thing—like the first softness of spring and its first sure fragrance, only to be guessed at in the wind.

I felt like entering at once into a hearty conversation with Aunt Marcia; I wanted to sit back and watch Antoinette. But there was little opportunity to sit in observant quiet when Marcia Gerardin was near. She observed in her own way that the château was a fine house and worth seeing, but:

“I wait for dark days to look at interiors and now the sunshine is going to waste in buckets-full!”

In half an hour she had tumbled herself into riding clothes and came striding out to the horses with us, while Antoinette stepped at her side like a slim princess. But before that ride ended I think it was Monsieur who had the greater part of my attention. He had lost most of the high spirits which had so filled him during the past two days and instead he was grown rather moodily silent. By that I knew that he was profoundly excited, and before we had returned I had guessed the reason. It was Antoinette. As he had confessed to me, he had never seen her before, not so much as her pic-

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ture, and therefore she had been as much of a shock to him as to me. It was more than a light pleasure to him; he was seriously and deeply moved—how much moved I at that time did not guess, but when I came down the stairs the next morning for breakfast I found that the picture of Monsieur's first wife, his only passion, was gone from above the great fireplace of the library!

From that moment I knew how Monsieur loved the girl. You will presume, then, that all my objections to the marriage were removed instantly. I confess it is very strange that they were not; but from the time of that ride, and particularly from the moment that I missed the big oil painting in the library, I felt a rooted aversion from this match which had never existed in me before. And as I watched Monsieur, day after day, courting Antoinette as seriously, as gravely as any youth carried away by a first romantic impulse, my anger and my horror grew.

Marcia Gerardin was naturally much with me during those days and I came to love her frankness and her bubbling talk. She could not have been more open with me if I had been her brother. But

the first real explosion of her mind came as we sat under a tree beside the tennis courts watching Antoinette play with Monsieur, she flashing here and there, flushed and filled with the joy of the game, and Monsieur gliding on the other side of the net.

"Look!" muttered Mademoiselle Marcia beneath her breath. "I think that Monsieur is allowing Antoinette to win!"

"Perhaps," said I.

"Ah, but you know his game; and he can stroke more severely than this, can he not?"

I remembered some of the mighty duels he had had with Reynal, and how the ball had disappeared in the bright sunlight, dissolved with speed as they hammered it back and forth; I could not help smiling.

"Well, I could tell," said my companion. "I used to play the game very fairly; then the time came when I had to choose between butter and tennis, and of course like a sensible person I chose butter. But I know enough to see that he is working inside his strength, and that is not like him—that is very unlike him!"

"Is it so unusual?" I asked her.

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"Tush!" exploded she. "You know as well as I do that he is a man who always wins if he can; he is always the victor—and there goes a set to Antoinette, as I live!"

As they changed courts we heard her say: "You are not doing your best, Monsieur Limousin! You are not really severe with me!"

"I am afraid to let myself out," said Monsieur. "I am too inaccurate at this season of the year! However, now you shall see my full strength."

They began again. The softness of his stroking disappeared; the ball began to wink out of view in mid-air with the terrible power of his driving. Antoinette, gasping and then shrilling with excitement, raced back and forth, fighting her valorous best, but Monsieur's own errors, so it seemed, were defeating him. That day he was inspired with the racket; I have never seen better play. His cannon-shot volleys overpassed the black line by scant inches; his terrible passing shots skimmed across the side lines by as narrow a margin. He was playing most wonderfully, his great breast heaving with the violence of the work, and these accurate errors were giving her points when she

could not get a racket on the ball, except to pop it fruitlessly high in the air.

Marcia Gerardin studied this display with her chin on her clenched fist and her fat elbow on her knee.

"Ah—ah—ah!" said she. "I am right! I thought it was to be a mere commercial alliance—a distinguished and successful business contract—but by heaven, I think it is be a love match! Do not you, Monsieur Jean?"

She had that bad habit of making her questions as point-blank as her own remarks and a thousand times I have had to bite my lip before I could answer her. This time she did not allow me sufficient time to make a response. She said, smiling at me. "You would never make a very successful deceiver, Monsieur Jean. It takes you too long to invent—whereas Monsieur—why, he has composed an entire story before the question is out of one's mouth. You should study him, Jean!"

The reply came from me with an irrestrainable impulse.

"How can one study a lightning flash?"

And then I bit my lip again.

"There, there, there!" said she, chuckling. "I have surprised one precious morsel of truth from you. However, I shall not press the point. Only, as I asked you before, do you not think that it will be a love-match—at least upon the side of Monsieur?"

"I have no doubt," said I politely, "and therefore on both sides!"

"Which means," said she, "that if Monsieur decides to love Antoinette as well as her lands, it will follow as a matter of course that she must love him?"

It was the sort of ground which I most disliked to walk on, but her eye was fixed so steadily upon me that I had to make some sort of a reply:

"I can not imagine," said I carefully, "that any one could resist Monsieur—when he is inclined to be amiable."

"And when he is otherwise inclined? However," she went on, "though you may know Monsieur very well, I confess that I do not know Antoinette." She began to think aloud: "Sometimes, when I see how far we have gone in this affair, I don't know how she could draw out of it. But then again, I can not tell—I can not tell!"

I could not help saying coldly: "It would be impossible, of course, for Mademoiselle Gerardin to enter an alliance for the sake of—mere social considerations!"

My strange companion broke into laughter.

"Jean, Jean!" said she, "what a sweet romantic child you are! Are you frightfully angry with me now?"

"By no means, Mademoiselle."

"Oh, but you are! Your nice blue eyes are filled with fire; your brown face is covered with scarlet; and you have set your square jaw. You are exceedingly angry, Jean!"

I tried to laugh; it was a foolish attempt.

"One hopes to leave one's childhood—after a certain time," said I with all the dignity that I could present for the occasion.

"Does one hope so?" chuckled she, hugging her knees from the excess of amusement. "This one, however, does not hope so! You see, Jean, that I am still too young to marry; men can not abide my foolish ways—not even young men!"

Here she began to laugh until the tears filled her eyes and ran down her quivering cheeks. After

which she borrowed my handkerchief to dry her face. I can not tell why I did not hate that woman, but I did not; there was something about her which eventually never failed to find a tickling chord in my heart. I was chuckling in turn before she had finished her laughter.

“Dear Jean!” said she. “How I love you because you can laugh at yourself! However, let me tell you that it would *not* be impossible for Mademoiselle Gerardin—why don’t you call her Antoinette, Jean, and have done with it—to enter an alliance for mere social considerations!”

This repetition of my words made her pass off into another breeze of laughter; I waited patiently, smiling at her. In fact, I had come to be wonderfully fond of her.

“Social considerations,” she went on, “like this château and the sweep of lands around it are matters that might make a duchess chuck her title into a hand-bag and take the next steamer for Quebec. However, I confess again that I can not tell about Antoinette. I think I have brought her so far that she will sign a treaty; but whether I can make her come to the altar—no, that I can not tell!”

You can not imagine a woman in her position talking in this open fashion to the son of Monsieur, and at such a time; neither can I imagine it. But this was Marcia Gerardin.

It was not all. It is difficult for me to remember what she next said and tell myself that my ears reported the sense of it truly, yet I can swear to it. She exposed all their cards with a spread of her hands.

"Jean," said she, "I think that there is one thing which would convince Antoinette instantly——"

"Convince her of what?" I asked.

"That a marriage with Monsieur is a wise measure."

"And that?"

"If she could make sure from your own lips that the rumor which went through the country was not true—that Monsieur did *not* cause the death of your mother and your flight from the château!"

XXII

I REPEATED these startling words of Mademoiselle Gerardin two or three times with numb lips. And here she said:

“I have not meant to cut you so cruelly deep, Jean.”

“It is nothing,” gasped I, nearer to fainting than to consciousness.

“This is the Limousin in you—even in you!” said she. “Well, do not answer me!”

“Are you not already answered?” said I. “Am I not here at the château? Are not Monsieur and I upon the best relations?”

“Exactly!” cried this odd woman. “I have pointed that out a thousand times to Antoinette. But she is troubled with a sort of extra sense, Jean, which comes between her and what she sees and hears. On this question, she is stubborn, and when I try to overwhelm all of her objections, what do you think she says?”

"I can not tell," said I, still with my brain spinning. "What is it that she says?"

"That there is something wrong with the château. Why, one would think it full of ghosts, to hear her! Do you wonder that I think her a queer girl?"

"I do not, Mademoiselle," said I.

I took the first opportunity, after that, to escape from her, for I dreaded more of these same questions as I dreaded a trial by fire. Marcia Gerardin had been educated in England, which I presume was the reason of her fondness for that language, and the cause of her blunt open manner of speech. I liked her more than ever after this conversation; but I also dreaded her more. Above all, I feared lest she should carry her suggestion to Monsieur. What would happen if he put pressure upon me to give Antoinette Gerardin any direct assurances that all was well and never had been otherwise between him and me? For I thought that there was something in me which would keep me bowing to his will in this matter. How little I knew his strength and my weakness!

I think it was the very next day that put me, I considered, past this danger. I had gone down to

the edge of the river and launched a canoe in the late afternoon, which is the most enchanting time upon the water, when I heard the voice of Monsieur calling for me through the trees. His call always had made me wish to run away; I obeyed that impulse now to the extent of shooting the canoe a few strokes down the lee of the river bank; but I saw that this was folly. So I backed water and answered him. He came crashing through the shrubbery like a moose, laughing at the sharp branch points and the whiplike limbs that he set lashing. He came into my view with his hat knocked to one side, his blue-flannel coat covered with leaves and dust and a jagged rent in his white trousers.

"It is done," said he, waving down to me.

"What is that, Monsieur?" I asked him, guessing very well but seeing that he wished to talk and explain.

"Have you an extra paddle there?" said he.

"I have."

He sprang instantly into the canoe, squatting in the prow—well back so that he would not dip the nose of the little craft too deep; he started us off into the river with powerful thrusts of his paddle.

"I must be on the water more!" called he over his shoulder. "This is glorious; besides, she tells me that she loves canoeing. Why have you not taken her out? Is there no spirit in you, lad?"

"You have monopolized her shamefully; I have had no opportunity!"

His great laughter went booming across the water.

"Have I not? Have I not?" cried he.

He had been shooting us through the water at a tremendous pace with his mighty paddle-work. Now, by an evolution which nearly capsized the frail boat, he whirled himself around and sat facing me, the shining paddle across his knees.

"Could any youth," went on Monsieur, "have made a stronger dead set at a girl than I have made at her?"

No young man, of course, could have spoken in this fashion of an affair of his heart, but Monsieur knew no shame—no more than a king of other days, whose vices were splendid because they were a king's.

"You have surrounded her with attention," I admitted, wondering if in my middle age I could

ever reach such a stage of naturalness. He was like a very young boy, full of an exploit; like a barbarian ready to boast!

I kept up a steady pace with my paddle, glad of the work which gave employment to my hands and permitted me to shift my glance from his blazing eyes to pick our course.

"Ah," said Monsieur, "what a difficult game it has been!"

He sighed and laughed at the same time.

"Because," he went on, "I could not put it on the basis of love; merely as a sensible alliance. That was how I had to present the case to her. Without the help of Marcia I should have been lost—may she inherit a crown in Heaven for her good work! But the double pressure has been too much. How do you think, Jean, that I finally approached this Venus, this wise and lovely girl?"

My face grew hot; I hoped that he would attribute it to the work of paddling and therefore I labored more arduously than ever.

"I shall tell you," said he, laughing still. "We had come in from the tennis courts. I had taken the racket from her hand. I had turned over a dozen

situations in my mind trying to select the proper one, but gradually coming to know that the least touch of romance or of passion would be repulsive to her. So I said as I wiped my forehead with my handkerchief—ha! ha! ha!—Jean, was not that a moment for a proposal?”

“It was a strange moment,” I agreed, choking with distaste and wishing with all my heart that I did not have to listen to his next words.

“This was the time I selected. I said to her :

“ ‘My dear Antoinette, you have beaten me so outrageously to-day that I should like to keep you with me a long time until I get my revenge. I should like to keep you indefinitely, Antoinette!’ ”

“What do you say to that? It was not bad, I imagine. It was worthy of being put into a book, I presume. Sometimes, when I consider myself, I wonder that I do not sit down and write out some of that which is in my mind. But it would be strong meat intended only for strong men—and the world is full of babies—babies!”

“Perhaps that is true,” said I.

“Do you know, Jean, that although her eye is so softly feminine, yet it is the only one I have ever

encountered—except Reynal's—that can look fairly into mine without drooping or growing unsteady? When I said that to her, she looked up to me in her quiet way.

“‘I suppose that I understand you?’ said she.

“‘You do,’ said I.

“‘Shall I be honest?’ said she.

“‘Then I trembled. Yes, I, François Limousin, trembled before this child.

“‘By all means be honest,’ said I.

“‘I admire you, Monsieur,’ said she, ‘and think I might easily be afraid of you; but also do not think that I ever could love you.’

“‘My heart stood still. *My heart*, not that of some moon-calf boy!

“‘Is love, then,’ said I, ‘the only good motive for action in our lives?’

“‘I think not,’ said she.

“‘I breathed again. She went on: ‘I believe that my father and my mother married for the purest love. But they had an unhappy home. Love makes a tyrant of a man and of a woman; I should be afraid of myself and of the future if I were in danger of falling in love.’

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“ ‘Antoinette,’ I could not help breaking in on her, ‘you speak like a woman of mature sense!’

“ ‘Thank you,’ said she. ‘And thank you, too, for the offer you make me. I have tried to look clearly at this thing, Monsieur. I have talked it over very carefully with my Aunt Marcia. And I hope it is not wrong for me to say that since you wish me, I shall become your wife, Monsieur!’

“ ‘Damnation, Jean, is not that enough to make you stop your paddling?’

“ ‘I congratulate you, Monsieur.’

“ ‘No, but throw your paddle in the air—shout—strike your hands together. It is no ordinary woman—it is she! It is this strange and beautiful Antoinette who is to be my wife!’

“ ‘I trust that you will have nothing but happiness.’ I could not say more; I was choked and sick.

“ ‘So cold?’ said he. ‘Ah, well, I wonder at you! You are too young, I suppose, to care for her. You wish a more dainty dish. You will have some delicate blonde with baby-blue eyes and a soft mouth which even smiling spoils; and a hand like crumpling rose petals, and a voice like tinkling music, and a

brain and soul not yet fit to leave the cradle! That will be the love and the wife for you, Jean. But if I could strip before your eyes the strong heart and the noble soul of this girl, you would fall upon your knees and worship her!"

This, you must remember, was spoken by Monsieur, not by some village lover. I listened to him, but my soul was filled with its own picture of her. And she had promised to become his wife!

"I live in Heaven, therefore!" said he. "I live in Heaven, but the sword is suspended over my head by a strand of most delicate silk. The least touch lets it fall and my happiness dies. She is full of doubt, she is full of suspicions; I think it is because she half fears me, because she has glimpses of the devil in me, that she is willing to marry me. Danger is attractive. It appeals to an imp of the perverse in us. She loves strength. When my forehand drive almost tore the tennis racket out of her hand, she laughed. And yet not masculine, Jean. All woman—a fragrance—an intoxication! And by a single touch I lose her! Turn back to the shore, quickly, quickly! I must see her again!"

He picked up his paddle, turned into his place

and gave to the boat the power of a driving motor. He kept on until the prow was wedged deep in the sand; then he leaped on shore with a violence that almost upset the little craft. Half-way up the bank, however, he paused again.

“No,” said he, speaking his thought aloud, “no—no! I must not be too impulsive. She has seen enough of me for the moment. She has seen quite enough; and if she remains too long near the secret, she will guess it! Come ashore, Jean!”

He dragged up the boat with me in it as lightly as though it had been a feather. When I stood at his side, he put a hand on my shoulder.

“I have another thought which is better,” said he. “I have persuaded her to remain at the château until the marriage. Now she is in my hand and to keep her from slipping out, I shall leave her much with you. It grows upon me! Do you see, Jean, that while she is with you she will read me by what she finds in you. If she finds in you a gentle and sensitive soul, she will remember that you are my son, and therefore you will be a glass through which she looks and thinks she discovers certain new and delightful things in me.”

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He began to laugh again. With his arm through mine he dragged me up the slope.

"Monsieur," I said. "Is it kind or safe?"

"Kind?" said he. "Safe?"

"She is very beautiful!" said I.

At this he began to laugh and clap me on the shoulder.

"At the worst," said he, "it will be a pleasant torture to you. So it is not very unkind. As for safety? Why, she is not a complete fool, I trust. And yet you remind me of another thing. You *have* become a man."

He broke forth in laughter again.

XXIII

WE FOLLOWED toward the house the same path along which my mother and I had walked almost a year before, but Monsieur was chattering gaily every step of the way and when we came from the edge of the forest into the view of the château he paused to say:

“We’ll make a formal garden there. She is fond of such things. It will keep her amused. I must suggest it to her to-night; and then she can plan it during the next two weeks. Nothing like work to keep people out of mischief!”

“And the marriage?”

“In a fortnight.”

“So soon!”

“Soon? No, it is fourteen eternities away—fourteen endless days during any moment of any one of which she may slip out of my hand. But I lean upon you, Jean; I trust you!”

"You are wrong," said I. "Suppose that she were to turn my head as she has turned yours?"

He laughed that thought to scorn.

"You would never dare," said he. "Besides, she is not the proper type for you. Ah, I know your mind too well!"

I endured his contempt in silence for the second time.

In the library before dinner the announcement was made very quietly. Marcia Gerardin embraced her niece; I shook hands with Antoinette and with Monsieur; then we had a glass of wine together. That was all there was to it. I could not help fixing my eyes upon the girl to see if she did not change color; but she showed not the least emotion, so far as I could make out.

So she was sold!

It grew to a terrible pain in me as I looked on her beauty, her gentleness. I left early and went up to my room.

I believe that I sensed a change in it even as I came through the doorway, and as I turned up the flame in the throat of the lamp, a little shudder of cold went through me. I knew that it was Pierre

Reynal before I whirled around and found him seated in the corner of the room. He stood up and bowed to me with much dignity; I, as usual, did not know how to deal with him.

"I have not expected you, Reynal," said I at length. "And it's only proper to warn you that you are not wise to come here, where I am alone with you."

"The thing for which I have come is worth danger."

I glanced at him sharply. He was more repulsively hideous than ever, I thought; and the brown of his face was changed toward a sickly yellow.

"You are ill!" said I.

Here he leaned a little forward in his chair, staring.

"And if I were?" he asked in his harsh voice.

"Come, Reynal, I am not a brute. I have known you too long not to have some heart for you."

"I believe that you have," said Pierre with emotion. "I believe that you would turn your purse into my hand! God bless you for that, Monsieur Jean! It makes me hope for greater things."

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"You are excited, Reynal," said I more coldly. "Is anything really wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said he, recovering his self-possession at once. "There is nothing wrong with me."

"Then will you tell me your errand here?"

"I have waited until you had seen the château and the people in it again. You have had time enough for that?"

"Certainly. What point is there to that?"

"A great point. For you will know by this time that it is damnation for you to remain."

I was more angered than surprised. It was a poisonous thing to hear this Reynal reproach me.

"What under heaven do you wish?"

"Under Heaven," repeated he with the same gravity which he had used before, "I hope to persuade you to leave the château."

"You speak like a priest," said I. "Have you not studied for the clergy?"

He staggered me by replying calmly, "I have."

"You!" said I, remembering in a hot flood all the things which I held against him—and the list was long! But I added with a sneer: "What induced you to give up the good work, Pierre?"

"A woman, Monsieur," said he.

I never was sure when he was mocking and when he was serious, because the frightful leer into which his face was perpetually drawn added a comment to everything that he spoke. Yet I had never known him to be guilty of a jest, I think. I turned this last sentence of his back and forth in my mind, guessing at many new things in my old enemy. For a moment I almost believed him, almost pitied him.

Then I said: "I will confess that I do not intend to remain long at the château. I shall be here no longer than the day of the marriage."

"So!" cried Reynal, with his eye lighting. "You are to be a witness to the horror?"

I could not, of course, listen to such language. I told Reynal as much in such a tone that he prepared to leave me.

"I came to give you a warning," said Reynal bitterly, "and instead, it is you who have warned me!"

He said this in a tone of such prophetic bitterness that I was silenced; there are moods and tones which can not be answered. He strode to the door, but turned back from it suddenly. His face in

repose was ugly enough. Stirred by emotion, he became positively frightful.

"God will not permit it!" declared Reynal, in such a voice that I was amazed again. "He will not allow more blood to be shed!"

I let him escape through the door because my head was ringing and whirling with all manner of frightful thoughts.

When I snatched open my door, he was not there. I hurried out, and at the next turn of the hall I stopped abruptly, for there stood the tall shadow of Pierre Reynal, stooped before the locked door of my mother's room. While I watched, I saw his hand trace a cross upon head and breast.

I did not wait to see any more. Monsieur had never favored the teaching of religious lessons in the château, and he had planted in my mind the feeling which I still have—that religion is really childish superstition; yet when I saw such a man as Pierre Reynal in prayer, I was touched. Indeed, he had done her enough harm to pray for the peace of her soul and for her forgiveness!

I lay down on the couch before the open fire in my room—for this spring night was sharp with

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cold—and the result was, what with turning the strangeness of that day through my mind and wondering what to-morrow would bring us, I fell deeply asleep and did not waken until it was past midnight. By that time the fire had burned down to dull embers—a mere streaking of rust in the ashes of the hearth, and the chill of the air wakened me thoroughly. So I wrapped myself in a dressing-gown, turned up the light, and had just selected a book when I heard, from what I thought was the direction of Monsieur's room, a sound like a stifled groan, and then a stamping of feet.

XXIV

I WENT by the shortest route—that is to say, through my door to the balcony and down the balcony to Monsieur's window. He had been reading in bed; the lamp stood on the bedside table but the book lay crushed face-down upon the floor and the bed-clothes had been stripped wildly off the mattress and now pointed like a great white hand toward a corner where two men struggled.

I gave the French door my shoulder and as I lurched into the chamber I saw that Monsieur, in his pajamas, his activity masked by an entangling dressing-gown, lay on his back, beating and tearing at the face of a man who, with head down, had sunk his fingers in the throat of my father. I was too horrified to cry out; I merely threw myself on that murderous assailant.

It was like attacking the power of a writhing python. I was thrust back in an instant; a powerful blow in the face tumbled me half-senseless upon the

floor; and as I struggled again to my feet, I saw Pierre Reynal leap from the body of Monsieur and race on his moccasined feet to the balcony.

I let him go. My father lay with an empurpled face and his eyes thrusting out from his head, but by the time I had brought water, he was already sitting up, gasping, his head bent far back on his shoulders as he drank in the life-giving air. I helped him to his feet, and the trembling helpless bulk that I supported taught me how far spent he really had been. As he sank into the chair, his head dropping feebly against the cushion, I saw the reddened base of his throat where the thumbs of Reynal had been biting to cut off the air. Another ten seconds, or five perhaps, and there would have been an end. I found a brandy bottle and brought him a glass of it, which he drank with a hand trembling so much that half the contents spilled out along the front of his pajama coat.

What I chiefly marveled at was that any man could have mastered the Herculean strength of Monsieur as Reynal had done. I looked to see some bruise or sign of a blow upon the head, but there was none. By the naked power of his hands Reynal

had done this thing and come within a breath of taking the life of the ruler of Limousin.

Here some one began to tap at the door, with an increasing insistence and loudness.

"Answer!" gasped Monsieur. "Remember! There is nothing wrong!" I gaped at him and he repeated: "There is nothing wrong!"

From the inside of the door I asked who was there and the uneven voice of the new secretary, Lafitte, answered from the hall:

"In my room above this, I heard strange noises which I thought came from *your* room!"

"This is Jean Limousin," said I. "There is nothing wrong!"

There was a slight pause. I thought that he had turned away when he asked in a more excited manner than before:

"I beg ten thousand pardons, Monsieur Jean. But may I not hear the voice of Monsieur himself?"

It was a very good token of the resolute honesty and courage of Lafitte that he should have stuck to his post in this manner, but the mere asking of that question made the hair prickle upon my head, of course.

Monsieur, however, had by this time so far recovered his breath that he was able to call out, though in a very hoarse strained voice: "There is no trouble, Lafitte. Run along to bed, my good fellow. There is nothing wrong!"

I heard Lafitte clear his throat in an undecided fashion as though this answer did not at all satisfy him—and well it might not! If he had heard what I had heard, plus the sound of the French door to the balcony being broken in by my shoulder and the turmoil of my attack upon Reynal added to the rest, it was indeed enough to alarm him. But at length his footsteps went along the hall and I turned back to my father.

He had recuperated wonderfully, and though his face was still swollen and crimson, he had lighted a cigarette and was smoking it, with a shaking hand on which there was a drop of the blood of Reynal. He seemed to be ashamed of the situation in which I had found him. Already he had thrown the bedding back on the bed, and had reordered his dressing-gown and was combing his thick short beard into a better trim.

He greeted me with: "I was about to tear the

scoundrel's head from his shoulders when you broke in and let him escape in the mix-up!"

"Really?" said I, with an irresistible impulse to smile at this easy invention. "I am sorry that I came in on you, then!"

At this, he laughed in a broken wheezing voice, caressing his bruised throat carefully.

"No, Jean, no! It will not do, I see. No, I must confess that I was nearly a dead man. That devil is a practised wrestler—a practised assassin, I meant to say. He had a strangle-hold before I fairly knew that he intended to attack me. But if I have a chance at him again, I promise you that I shall break the villain in two."

You must consider that this was a man past fifty years in age, and yet his first effort was to escape the odium of having needed help.

I made things as easy for him as I could.

"He has taught me some of his wrestling tricks," said I. "He has an iron grip."

"One would not have guessed that he had taught you much," said Monsieur, "to judge by the ease with which he flattened you on the floor."

"He could master me in an instant," I confessed. "Or almost any other man, I think!"

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"There is an admission for a young man of his hands like you," smiled Monsieur. "But indeed I think that you are right and I need not be so shamed."

"But, Monsieur," I could not help breaking in, "is he to escape in this fashion?"

From what Reynal had said to me when he was in my room on that same night, I knew now that he had planned some such an attack as this even at that time. But if he intended to kill, why did he not fall back upon his unrivaled skill with deadly weapons? I could not comprehend this barehanded attack.

Monsieur answered me: "If I wanted a pursuit of him, I should have given an alarm long before this. No, that is not to the point. I do not care to have him handled by the law. Let us use our own ways and our own laws upon this assassin!"

"As you please, sir."

"Another thing—do not let a word of this come out to-morrow. And Lafitte—I must warn him—no, you must give him the warning for me. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Go to him at once, then. He is an—unimaginative man; he may take this too seriously. There

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has been a great deal of talk about strange occurrences in the Château Limousin. Go to him now, Jean. But first, I thank you, lad, for your quick bold way of going at Reynal! I may say that I owe my life to you—as you owe yours to me. And so we part equal, do we not?”

He could not for an instant admit an obligation to another man. It was the worst of torments to him to do so. For my part, I would have given a very great deal to know how Reynal had entered the room. The French door had been locked; and the door to the hall was locked also. It must have been, so far as I could see, that Monsieur himself had admitted Reynal and then, after some talk with him, there had been a sudden tigerish attack. What had passed between them, then, before the struggle commenced? But if Monsieur did not choose to speak of it, there was nothing I could do to gain an understanding of the encounter. Only this much was very clear: The old alliance which I had so long suspected between Reynal and Monsieur could never have existed except in my imagination. And that made the events that ended in the death of my mother more mysterious than ever.

I thought of these things as I hastened up to the

room of Lafitte. When he opened it to me, he was already fully dressed, and his revolver lay on the table in the center of the chamber.

"It was a mere nothing," I told him. "I was speaking with Monsieur in his room and as I left him I tripped on a rolled up corner of the rug and upset the table with the books on it—you understand, Monsieur Lafitte?"

He looked me straight in the eye after the fashion of one who tries to read the truth behind the speech.

"Very well," said he. "It is not for me to doubt what you say to me."

"However," I went on, to improve my story with a little more elaboration, "Monsieur is much impressed by the speed with which you came down to his room. If there *had* been a danger—you understand that Monsieur conveys to you his thanks!"

Lafitte did not smile. He merely bowed in acknowledgment.

"Monsieur is very kind," he declared coldly. "What seemed remarkable to me was the length of time during which the books continued—er—to fall from the table!"

This was a remark so pointed that I could not very well avoid making an answer. Moreover, from the very hostile manner of Lafitte, I could not help deducing that he believed there had actually been a physical encounter between my father and me! Considering the strange tales which had circulated through the countryside after the death of my mother, this attitude was not so extraordinary.

I did nothing but turn my back on the matter with a very confused face and go back to the apartment of Monsieur. God alone could tell what Lafitte would say.

I found my father bathing his throat with cold water and examining his bruises in the mirror. I explained that if the tale were told it would be a frightful story of an unnatural midnight battle between Monsieur and his son. He was as much agitated as I, but for different reasons.

"And if this story should come to the ears of Antoinette!" cried he. "Ah, I shall find a way of capturing Pierre Reynal and tearing him limb from limb! Go back to your room, however. Sleep well; to-morrow you must be cheerful and pleasant for my sake, Jean!"

XXV

THE very next day, I was forced to take up the burden of Monsieur with beautiful Antoinette Gerardin. My father was hoarse, that morning, and had a frightful headache, so that he pleaded the necessity of a business trip and left the two ladies in my hands. It could not have been done at a more unwelcome time. My own head was buzzing with the words which Reynal had spoken. Moreover, my amiable tormenter, Aunt Marcia, at once insisted that they take advantage of me.

"Because, Antoinette," said she, "you will have enough to do with middle-aged people after a few days; and you must not miss a chance to enjoy a youngster like Jean Limousin. As for me, my need is just as great, because I really am younger than you, Tony."

This, of course, was said in my presence, for the peculiar pleasure of seeing me writhe. Had I been

a little older, I think that I might have been able to manage Mademoiselle Marcia; but as it was, I could only rage *at* her or laugh *with* her as the occasion offered. On this day, I of course offered my humble services in whatever kind they chose. Antoinette said not a word. It was the fault of Marcia that we were forced into a walk. We went down by the river, where Aunt Marcia wished that we were in canoe; we went back through the forest, where she wished for wings; we climbed two gentle ranges of hills and here she found a tree with a comfortable spread of shade beneath it, and soft new grass with waves of gleaming ripples running through it. There she spread herself at ease.

"I shall not budge," said Aunt Marcia. "Yonder is a perfectly good road to the house. You may send back a carriage for me when you pass the stables. Now scatter along, and let me rest. I would like to wring the neck of the person who chose a walk to destroy this lovely day!"

This, of course, was the way of Marcia Gerardin. No one expected her to be logical.

"I'll stay with you, then," said Antoinette.

"In the name of God, Tony!" exclaimed Aunt

Marcia. "Where is your breeding? Do you wish to send the poor young man in alone?"

I declared that I would be enchanted to jog to the château and come back with a carriage for them.

"Don't be so proper and gracious, Jean," said Aunt Marcia. And she frowned on me. "I shall never approve of you until you learn to make me furiously angry. If you were Monsieur, what would he say?"

These questions about Monsieur, like so many barbed darts, she never wearied of casting at me.

"I have not the slightest idea," said I, feebly retreating from this virago.

"If you don't know, I'll tell you," said Aunt Marcia. "Shall I tell you, Jean?"

"If you wish," said I, growing wretched and casting a guilty glance at Antoinette.

She paid not the slightest attention to Mademoiselle Marcia, however; she always regarded her aunt as a sort of amusing toy, full of clownish antics, never to be taken seriously. I could not understand why Antoinette seemed to tower above Marcia, even physically, although she was so slender and not four inches above five feet.

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"Very well," said Marcia Gerardin, "since you wish me to tell you what Monsieur would say, I shall do it."

She sat up a little straighter and lifted her head. She dropped a hand upon one hip and smiled at Antoinette. Surely Monsieur had never shown either of them a single touch of the ironic cruel side of his nature, and yet here was a very good imitation of that wicked smile of Monsieur that still haunts me.

"You have chosen to walk out, Mademoiselle Gerardin," said she. "Therefore I shall wait until you are ready to walk in again!"

Here she bubbled into laughter, but Antoinette watched her seriously.

"That is why I love that man," said Marcia. "He is so apt to do an uncomfortable thing. Now run along. I want to be alone."

She lay down with her fat arms folded beneath her head.

"Shall I go, indeed?" said Antoinette.

"Heavens, Tony," said Aunt Marcia, "are you afraid of the boy now that you are about to become his mother?"

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Antoinette hesitated another instant and then, with a shrug of her shoulders, she was walking at my side on the way toward the château. From this hilltop we could see the broad roof lifting among the trees, but it was a good two miles away and all between were green-faced farmlands and noble woods.

"Aunt Marcia has not offended you?" asked Antoinette as we went down the slope.

"I am very fond of her," said I. "I think she understands and teases me because she knows that she can."

"There is a German proverb about that," answered Antoinette. "She likes you, immensely; because you puzzle her so much; that's one reason. She likes to be mystified!"

I could not help laughing.

"As a matter of fact," said I, "I feel transparent when I am near her. She is always reading me as easily as though I were in print."

But Antoinette shook her head.

"She usually has that air of assurance," said she. "But as a matter of fact she can't fit together the two Jean Limousins. Neither can I. We spend a great deal of time gossiping about you!"

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"That is flattering, I hope."

"Is it? But do you know what sort of a person I expected to find in you?"

"Please tell me."

"I expected a tigerish look and a wild eye."

"But why?"

"A young man capable of defying Monsieur, as rumor says that you have done."

"That is it?" sighed I. "Well, I shall tell you the sad story some day. Then you will see that I did nothing extraordinary."

"Now I guess at something tragic."

"Do! There is no other Jean Limousin than this one you have seen at the château—a very quiet and simple person."

"But so melancholy!"

I looked askance at her. We had entered a wood of maples, and the dappling shadows of the young leaves poured across her as she walked; and she was looking at me with such a quiet interest that I grew pleasantly giddy. She was not one of those pretty creatures whose youth is half their beauty. Age could never dim her loveliness, and this nearness to her made me tremble. I began to breathe internal

resolutions that I would say or do no foolish thing.

"If I am often a little silent," said I, "it is not because I am sad, but because I am not naturally very full of talk. Here at the château, all the years, there is not a great deal of conversation."

"Will you tell me about your boyhood? The moment I saw you, I wondered what sort of a *little* boy you were."

"You know," said I, "that children learn to talk by being with playmates of their own age. One does not chatter to the elders so easily."

"That is true," said Antoinette. "But there were some playmates for you?"

"Company came very seldom; it was too far to the village; and the children of the families who worked for Monsieur—well, Monsieur has certain ideas of caste—which I, for one, do not agree with!"

"Ah, yes," said Antoinette. "It must have been a lonely life for you, poor Jean."

"No, no, I was rarely lonely. At the time, if I thought it was a lonely existence I liked the loneliness. I was a little afraid of other children. But on the whole it was a beautiful, happy life. These woods are charming, are they not? And they have

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grown more pleasant since I was a youngster, of course; but I have another memory of them in which they seem like glorious giants. The shadows were so black that they left a stain; the sun that dropped through the branches was gold—one could catch handfuls of it!”

“That is delightful! I did not dream that you were such a happy youngster!”

“Did you not? I can tell you that this was a great fairy-land. The château was a place of mystery and darkness which had grown straight out of the heart of a story-book. I did not dream of other things; it filled my imagination.”

“In every detail?”

“In every one!”

“The ogre?”

“One does not miss such defects in a story,” said I, with a shiver.

“And the fairy princess, Jean?”

“Ah, yes. She was here! If you could have seen her, how you would have loved her!”

I stopped and touched her arm. Speaking to her, all the sorrow was quite gone from those old days; all was pure as air after rain. There was no

longer sadness out of that other remembered life; only the sweetness of it fell suddenly about me, like music, like gaily showering petals.

I paused here, wondering over the way the woods carried me along; Antoinette was not smiling but her face was bright.

"She was not so beautiful as you are," said I, peering. "She was a little smaller. She was not so queenly and so strong, but she came out of Heaven and kept the glory about her."

"But who *was* the fairy princess, Jean?"

I had been thinking of myself of ten years before, and thinking so vividly that it was no more than a charming story in which I had been a character; but this question brought me to a sudden sense of mortality and I stammered: "It was my dear mother, Antoinette!" I walked on hastily.

XXVI

I HAD a great contempt for myself because this rush of grief had so nearly unmanned me; I could have beat my hands together for shame and I stole a glance at Antoinette as soon as I was able, to see what was in her face. Upon my honor, there was nothing but tenderness there. She knew that I was looking at her and therefore she said quietly: "I am sorry."

When I saw that she was so sincere and so simple about it I could not help stopping again. Do you think that I was very Gallic and explosive and sentimental? However, this was a thing which needed speech and I had never talked of it. So, as we faced each other, I cried out: "You are filled with gentleness and kindness! Some day I want to talk to you about her."

"With all my heart, Jean!"

"Come," said I, "let us walk along. I am a little choked." I took her arm and we went on, I scarcely

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knowing what I did, but overwhelmed with the sense of joy because I had found this girl to whom I could talk. I shall try to put down what I can remember of the things we said.

"I like you, Antoinette."

"I am very glad."

"If you had smiled at me, you would have stabbed me to the heart."

"You make me happy—and yet very sad, too. Why is that?"

I wondered at her. "Is it so with you? And with me, also! I am so full of happiness that it seems as though all the joy out of my life had been gathered and poured together through my body and my brain; yet there is an ache of sadness in my throat. Antoinette, I think I have never seen such a beautiful day!"

"Why have you never let me see you before?"

"Because this self never lived, until I took your arm and walked with you through this enchanted forest. So enchanted that only to utter your name is a wild joy to me, Antoinette. Is not everything beautiful to-day?"

"Look!" said she. "See that silly squirrel

fluffing his tail up and down and barking at us! Why is he so excited; and how his eyes shine!"

"He is saying in the clearest words: Be happy! Be happy! Be happy! Do you hear it?"

"I do now, of course; it is perfectly clear!"

"I trust that we shall never reach the château. Just to walk on like this—I am bewildered with excitement! Are you?"

"Ah, Jean, I think I know. It is the fragrance of these violets—such a cold, small, exquisite fragrance."

"That is it."

"Shall we pick some?"

"No, no, no! For if we pause—if we do anything but walk steadily along, not too fast—the enchantment will break. I am afraid of that!"

"Perhaps you are right. How everything smiles at us! Do you not feel a kindness even for that great white cloud so poured full of sun. Do you see it?"

"It is beautiful! And the very smell of all the wet growing things in the woods is different to-day."

"Kindly, is it not? I feel, somehow—just

around the corner of my mind—as though I could understand everything.”

“Is it not wonderful? What is in your mind is in mine; what you think is my thought; what you feel is in my heart! How delightful it is to be with you!”

“It is living in a dream and knowing that one must waken. But I don’t want to waken, Jean!”

“We shall not; we shall fight away the dull old world that we have just escaped from. Shall we not?”

“This is too beautiful to last.”

“It can not be! It is a sin to think that!”

“And yet we were both sad, a little time ago.”

“It was the thought of my dear mother. I have been almost listening for her voice.”

“Yes, as though her spirit were in the air beside us! A happy spirit, is it not?”

“How beautiful your hand is!”

“It is only an every-day hand, Jean.”

“No! When I touch it, my heart leaps!”

“And mine; why is it?”

“God alone can tell. Do you know what I feel?”

“Tell me!”

"That if there is a God——"

"He is watching us!"

"Because He has breathed some of the sweetness of Heaven into our nostrils this day. But if——"

And, as we spoke, stumbling joyously down a path which perhaps I had walked a thousand times before, but which now seemed as strange as a vision of beauty, we came suddenly to the last thin screen of trees, and beyond them we saw, solemn and tall, the strong walls of the Château Limousin, with the big windows looking down at us.

We stopped with a shock.

"It is the end!" she whispered.

We had shrunk back to the shelter of a tree and somehow, as I looked down at her, at her eyes, and at her lips, grown pale like all her face—I put my arms about her and her body yielded beneath them, and I kissed her; and she was straining away from me with only a faint strength; and I was sobbing with a broken breath:

"I love you, Antoinette! I love you! And you love me!"

When sense came back to me, it came as suddenly as the day steps into a blackened room when the wind waves the drawn curtain aside. Blinded by

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the sense of what I had done, I gave back from her, and waited wretchedly, oh, so filled with guilt, to hear her denounce me; but she only leaned a hand against the trunk of the tree and with the other hand pressed to her heart she looked down to the ground. I covered my eyes with a groan, and when I looked up again, she was gone.

I did not attempt to follow. There was a fallen log near me which had not yet been cleared away by the woodsmen; on that I sat down and took my head between my hands to try to puzzle out this wilderness into which I had gone, carrying the betrothed of Monsier with me. If indeed I *had* carried her with me! Or was it only a headlong impulse of the moment which had made her seem what she was not?

As I sat there with my head in my hands, I was sure that she was filled with rage and scorn. Walking at her side through the forest she had seemed like a happy child with me; but at this distance of thinking, I could see her only as the bride of Monsieur, full of wisdom, full of strength, a proper wife for him. And she, who had trusted herself so completely to the son of her betrothed, and had been so shamed and defiled by him——

Here I could not endure the agony for another moment. I sprang up and hurried to the stables, where I took a carriage at once and drove at a wild pace up the road toward that spot where Marcia Gerardin had been inspired by the devil to send the pair of us off together.

She was sound asleep, or she pretended to be sound asleep, and I had to shout again and again from the road where my horses were dancing and fretting on the reins, before she sat up and then came to me. She got in beside me, yawning, and I made the horses fly, but even so the way was long.

She chattered; I was mute.

"Have you lost your tongue? Can you only say: 'Yes, Mademoiselle; no, Mademoiselle?'"

"I am sorry, Mademoiselle."

"Look at me!"

"I dare not; the horses would flip us into the ditch in a moment."

"Would they do so? I know what it is!"

"What is it, then?"

"You have quarreled with Tony. Well, I shall never stop plaguing her until I find out all about it."

In spite of myself, a groan came from my lips;

and she—oh, there was a very devil of penetration in that woman!—she said to me: “Draw in the horses, Jean!”

“I can not,” said I.

“I shall put my hands on the reins, then.”

“Ah, well!” So I drew back those racing horses to an easy jogging trot.

“Now, my boy,” said Aunt Marcia, very serious and frowning, “what the devil have you done?”

I give her exact words; she was apt to be shockingly rough.

“God knows!” said I. “I can not talk!”

“So—so—so!” said Aunt Marcia, with a little thoughtful pause between the words. “There is spirit in you, after all! So—so—so! You have actually dared to be indiscreet!”

“Mademoiselle,” said I, trembling violently, “I beg you to let me drive you to the château and leave you; I can not speak of——”

“Of this frightful thing? How terrible it must have been, Jean! The hideous thought comes upon me that you may even have attempted to kiss the hand of Tony. Is it that?”

“Mademoiselle!”

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“Or that you have actually kissed her lips?”

I could not speak; I was blinded with self-hatred and sick disgust.

But will you believe that she broke into a great laughter which at least served the purpose of keeping her from speech until we reached the château.

XXVII

YOU may guess that I had no ardent desire to hurry into the château after these bewildering events and this strange conduct on the part of myself, to say nothing of the unusual behavior of Mademoiselle Marcia. I was very much pleased when, as I went in at last, I was told by a servant that Lafitte wished to see me at my first convenience and that he was in the library. I went there to find him, of course, but there, to my terror and surprise, I found that Antoinette was already with the secretary. I would have withdrawn, but Lafitte seized on me at once. He had been showing some bindings to Mademoiselle Gerardin, and he came straight for me with a volume open in his hand.

Said he: "I have been waiting very eagerly, hoping that I could talk with you before I start for the train."

"The train?" said I. "Oh, has Monsieur sent you off on some matter of business?"

"I wished to speak with you," said Lafitte, "so that you could inform Monsieur when he returns that I have gone."

"Some relative is sick, Lafitte?" said I sympathetically.

He smiled a wry smile.

"It is not that, Monsieur. But I feel that I can not remain in the château after the affair of last night."

I could have choked the fool for saying so much in the presence of Antoinette; I drew him further into the corner of the room and remarked softly that such language was extremely indiscreet in the presence of a third person. At this, he colored a little and then announced with his chin raised that he did not know whether or not it was his duty to let every one know what he had heard, what he had seen, and what he had cause to suspect!

I was quite at sea with fury, despair—and amusement. I was furious at the unsuspected pig-headed honesty of this Puritan; I was in despair when I considered what the results of such scandalous gossip might be; and I was really amused when I saw how completely in error this good man

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was. Consulting nothing but his conscience, he was about to commit a really important crime against Monsieur and me.

I could not help saying: "Why did you not communicate this decision to Monsieur this morning?"

He winced a little; in fact, he was a thoroughly honest fellow, and he at least wanted to be brave.

"It was not because I feared Monsieur," he announced at last. "But it is my habit never to announce an important decision in the morning. That is a testy period; I always wait until the afternoon has brought matters around to normal."

"It is a wholly admirable idea," said I. "Now will you tell me frankly what it is that you feel yourself called upon to communicate to the world?"

He cleared his throat: "I do not wish to embarrass you, Monsieur Limousin!"

I wondered how my father could have made such an error in employing this man of the conscience.

"I had rather be embarrassed before my face than behind my back," said I, growing a little hot.

"I have no intention of dodging behind coverts in order to harm the family of Limousin," said he.

I could not help breaking out: "You are wise, Monsieur! It might be a dangerous proceeding. To come back to the matter of last night, let me tell you that I can guess what is in your mind."

"I presume that you can, sir."

"It is this: You believe that I left my room last night, entered the chamber of my father and made an attack upon him."

He flushed when I put the matter so bluntly to him.

"I feel," said he, "that the noises I heard were not made by the overturning of a table which had books upon it!"

"Ten thousand damnations!" said I. "Of course not! Come, come, Lafitte, you realize that there are times when it is necessary for a white lie to be told, do you not?"

"I am in the habit of telling the truth," declared Lafitte. "I have not the energy to build up elaborate inventions."

There is always something frightfully irritating about extreme virtue. I had the greatest desire in the world to break the neck of this stiff-backed man. And I could not help remembering, also, what the

reactions of Monsieur would be if he heard of such a tale going the rounds of the countryside.

"Do you realize," said I, "that such a report as you may make would perhaps have great consequences?"

"I do fully realize it," said he.

"Do you also realize that, whatever really happened behind the door of my father's room, he was not seriously injured, nor was I, and that in such a conflict, if there had been one, there must have been some outward evidences left? Above all, you have my solemn oath, which I shall take in any manner you desire, that your presumption is wrong. What *did* happen in that room, I see no reason why the world should not know, as well as the cause of my entering it. It is simply a whim of Monsieur."

"I believe," said the rigid Lafitte, "that Monsieur's door on to the balcony—the same balcony which your chamber opens upon, was found forced from the outside this morning."

I was astonished that Monsieur could have allowed such a peculiar bit of evidence to remain for the world to see. More than all, I was thunder-struck that he should allow the rumor a chance of

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spreading when there was an innocent truth to explain away everything. He knew that the entire countryside had already been scandalized by the report of a quarrel between Monsieur and his son which had sent the son scattering wildly away into the world; behind this, there was the more distant and tragic legend of Hubert Guillaume of which it was only known that the boy had committed suicide after a quarrel with his father. And yet in the face of such a scandal, at a time when he was using his utmost endeavors to bring about a marriage with beautiful Antoinette Gerardin, he faced all these dangers rather than expose to the knowledge of the world the attack which Pierre Reynal had made upon him. How could I understand? What was the hidden story known only to Reynal and my father?

"Listen to me, Lafitte," said I, more and more despairing. "It is at least reasonable to wait until Monsieur returns to the house."

At this he shuddered.

"I tell you, Monsieur Limousin," said he with a great emotion and entirely too loud a voice, "I could not be persuaded to spend another night in this

house! I believe that I am not a coward, but this is a thing which I fear to do!"

"Lafitte," said I through my teeth, "your voice is reaching the ears of Mademoiselle."

He shrugged his broad shoulders; his virtue was making him more aggressive every moment. And my irritation grew, also. The pulse of my heart was so great that it swayed my entire body.

"I am sorry for that," said he, "but I really do not know that it is honest for me to leave the château before I have opened the entire matter to her ears as far as I know it!"

This was really too much, as you will agree; still I kept myself stiffly in hand and managed to control my voice, also.

"Monsieur Lafitte," said I, "you are really going a great length in a matter upon which you have no positive evidence."

"Monsieur Limousin," said he—he had the true heart of the missionary and the reformer which swells the stronger when it encounters evil or the very shadow of evil—"Monsieur Limousin, since I came to the château, I have closed my eyes upon a great deal; I have endeavored to see nothing

except the work which lay before me in the course of every day. I have endeavored to keep from dwelling upon certain odd bits of evidence; for instance, that Monsieur has been twice married, on both occasions to young and beautiful women——”

“Will you keep down your voice, Lafitte!” gasped I, and stole a glance at Antoinette.

I have no doubt that she would have left the room before this, if we had not been standing so near to the door that her withdrawal would have been exceedingly marked; as it was, she had already gone to the farthest corner of the room and there she sat with her face half-turned away from us, pretending an interest in a book which was in her lap, and yet the pages never turned! For the voice of Lafitte had a sharp, nasal, American quality which made his words extraordinarily clear and gave his voice a great carrying quality.

I think that Lafitte hardly heard my last protest. He was filled with a headlong excitement, now, that carried him blindly ahead. He was one of those muscular, deep-chested types who make physical culture a part of their religion—the care of the body with the care of the mind and the soul—and now

he was fairly expanding with virtuous indignation and suspicion.

He went on in a louder voice than ever :

“Both of the wives of Monsieur died suddenly; a young son by his first marriage was found with a bullet through his head—fired by his own hand, it was said. You yourself, Monsieur Limousin——”

“Lafitte,” I breathed, beginning to view him through a red mist, “I ask you earnestly to leave this room with me that we may talk alone. And in the meantime, if my solemn oath to you——”

“Monsieur,” said Lafitte, “did you speak of your oath?”

“I did,” said I.

In this day, when the minds of men turn with a careless curiosity into all the corners of thought, and when religion is little more than a dreamy habit with most, it is difficult to remember that, a scant half generation before, religion was a blind passion in many breasts. I say this to explain the singular bluntness of Lafitte’s next remark.

For he said: “I do not know, Monsieur, what oath would be of value from a man who has no belief in a Creator and a just God!”

The double irritation of this foolish talk on the one hand and of Antoinette as an audience on the other hand, had worked me up to a higher pitch than I dreamed; I thought that I still had myself well in hand at the very instant that my patience was completely gone. Now my passion burst out like a fire that reaches dry leaves. There must have been a warning of what was coming in my face for Lafitte with a sudden exclamation leaped back and put up his hands to defend himself. He might as well have erected a paper screen against a cannon ball, for my fury had magnified me as I have heard that insanity magnifies the mad. I leaped in at him, drove my fist through his warding arms and reached his face with such force that I felt my knuckles bite through flesh and grind against bone. Lafitte was flung from his feet against the wall by this terrible blow and then pitched to the floor upon his face.

XXVIII

WHEN I recovered my senses—for such a devilish outbreak is like a wave of senselessness—I was holding Lafitte by the nape of the neck as a bull-terrier holds a dead dog and shakes it, and I was telling him harshly to stand on his feet again because I was not yet done with him. Then, as my wits came back and my eyes cleared, I first saw Antoinette standing pale and still in the far corner of the room and old Guilbert, who had just entered, looking on with a face of horror. I had only one controlling impulse and that was to get myself and my mischief away from the sight of Antoinette as quickly as possible. I lifted Lafitte in my arms. Although he was a sturdy chunk of a man, my passion still loaned me power, and I hurried with a light step out of the library, carrying my burden.

Behind me, as I went, I heard the voice of Guilbert break out: “Ah, the good God! It is the ghost of Monsieur!”

I took Lafitte into the next chamber—the dining-

room—and began to wash his face with water from a decanter. The blow had struck him beside the temple, splitting the skin. Besides, from his fall to the floor, his mouth was badly cut and already swelling. There was an instant when I feared that I had killed him, but then I was able to feel the flutter of his heart, very small and weak. All the time I was muttering to myself: “I have brought up the devil! All is lost! All is lost!”

Now that Lafitte had so far recovered that he was beginning to open his eyes and groan, I picked him up again and went with him up the two flights of stairs to his room. I met a servant on my way up and the fellow shrank against the wall and gaped at me. I presume that it was an odd sight to watch a man no larger than myself running lightly up a flight of stairs with such a burden as I then supported, but hysteria has made men do stranger things. The Limousin blacksmith told me how his infant daughter fell into a shallow run of water and her body lodged under a culvert which was boarded over with stout two by fours, nailed down with strong spikes. He tore those heavy timbers away with his naked hands and drew her out, still living!

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I called to the servant as I went past him to send for a doctor as fast as a horse could fly; then I went on with Lafitte to his room. His trunk stood packed in the center of the floor, surrounded by hand-luggage; I remember the scrupulous neatness with which this poor fellow had put the chamber to rights before he left it. Neatness was to him one of the chief moral virtues and disorder a sin fit for the devil!

I laid him on his bed and found that his eyes were now wide open, but they stared up at me without the slightest recognition. He began to groan in a terrible way and laid a hand against his bruised temple.

A hand tapped at the door.

"What is it? What is it?" cried I. "Is it the doctor?"

I had sent for the doctor hardly half a minute before, but my brain was in such a whirl that I took no heed of the passage of time.

"No," said the voice of Antoinette Gerardin, "it is only I, Jean."

First, like the foolish little boy who has broken the window but stoutly denies it, I thought of keep-

ing her from the room. Then, with a groan, I went to admit her. I found her pale but as calm as stone, and I remembering, wondering what madness could have given me courage to touch her lips with mine—that very day!

“I want to know if I can help,” said she. “How is Monsieur Lafitte now?”

“You may see him,” said I, and pointed to the bed.

I thought that she shrank a little as she went past me, but she sat down on the side of the bed and took the wrist of unlucky Lafitte in the tips of her fingers in a businesslike way that made me feel more helpless than ever.

As she replaced his hand at his side: “He will die!” I broke out.

She looked up to me with a face blank with thought, and then down at my hand.

“Your hand is bleeding, Jean,” was all she said. “You had better tie it up.”

I was pushed into a figurative corner, one might say, and told to be quiet, so I stood by and watched her dip a towel in cold water, wring it out, and make a swift, neat bandage around the head of

Lafitte. His groaning, which had continued with every other breath all this while, began to diminish, though his eye was as horribly empty as ever.

"I think it will be well to get him to bed," said Antoinette.

"There is a hope for him, Antoinette?"

"Oh, yes!"

How very calm she was!

She opened his trunk while I worked his clothes off; she found and tossed to me his night clothes and continued to take out what things he might need and arrange them in the drawers of the big chest in the corner of the room. When I had him between the sheets at last she came back again and sat down beside him, with her finger on his pulse once more. "Can you bring me some brandy?" said she.

In three bounds I was down the stairs and back again with a decanter; then I watched her raise his head gently and pour a dram down his throat. It made him cough and groan more heavily than ever, but after a moment both coughing and groaning ceased and his eyes closed.

"He is dead, Antoinette!" said I, clasping my helpless hands together.

"Hush!" said she. "His eyes would not close if he were dead!"

She turned and looked at me again, thoughtfully.

"I think that you had better go out into the open air," said she.

"I must stay here to do what I can," I protested. "I can not leave you to——"

"You must not talk so loudly. See—it disturbs him. I think he feels your voice even now! You must leave him, Jean!"

I stole down the stairs like a guilty cur. In the lowest hall I encountered Guilbert, and he shrunk from me as though I were a wild beast escaped from a cage. So I went out under the sky, and looked back upon the heavy walls of the château as though it were a place where a thousand devils lodged.

Sometimes I ran; sometimes I walked; it was dusk when I returned to the château, filled with weakness, very weary indeed, but with the fiend quite gone from my brain. The first person I encountered was she whom I could most easily face—Marcia Gerardin, and she took me by the arm and led me into a room and made me sit in a chair by the fire.

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"So!" grunted Mademoiselle Marcia. "So!"

She brought me a glass of wine and made me swallow it; then she sat down, scowling at me.

"You have distinguished yourself, Jean," said she.

I was full of despair.

"He is dying—he is dead!" I groaned.

"No."

"But the doctor has come?"

"Yes."

"And he gives no hope?"

"About this Lafitte? Do you think that I care what happens to that dark-minded little man? Tush!"

She waved poor Lafitte into outer darkness.

I begged her: "Then what, Mademoiselle Gerardin?"

"Then what?" said she, mimicking me savagely. "Then nothing—except the devil himself. Oh, young madman!"

"Mademoiselle," said I, "be gentle, for God's sake. I am very sick at heart!"

"Why are not young men kept upon a rope, and bridled?" said she. "Why are they allowed to roam

at large in this fashion? Can you tell me why? Tigers!"

I stared heavily at her.

"There is nothing I can say," said I. "There is nothing that I can say, Mademoiselle!"

She stamped her heavy foot upon the floor.

"But there *is* something which you can say," declared she. "You can tell me why you did not knock the fool down before he had had a chance to rattle out all that mischief! Can you explain that to me?"

"Why should I attempt to speak? I have acted the part of a devil!"

"You have acted the part of a ninny! If God gave you so much strength in your hands, why did he not give you enough sense to use it at the right time? But where is that strength of yours?"

She picked up my hand and turned it over; I confess that I was now trembling from head to foot. She tossed my hand away and shook her head.

"I can not understand," said she, "and nothing maddens me more than a mystery. As if Monsieur were not enough—now you!"

"Antoinette——" I breathed.

"Antoinette?" she mocked in the same whining tone. "Ay, that is the crux of the trouble, Antoinette! Oh, Jean, how much of a problem you have given me! How much of a problem!"

"Ah, but she despises me now!"

"Does she? I don't know! I don't know that I care. But Monsieur! Now what in the fiend's name will the headstrong child take into her capacious head to do? Oh, I wish that I could tell! I wish that I could tell!"

At this same unpleasant moment, the voice of Monsieur himself sounded in the hall; and I felt like the bidden child who hears the ogre entering the room.

"I have wit enough to guess one thing," said Marcia Gerardin, "which is that I had better see your father before you do. Go into that room—and leave the door one-half inch ajar, so that you will hear."

I should not have done it; it was not gentlemanly or brave; but I sneaked into the next room and left the door exactly as she had bidden me leave it.

XXIX

IT WAS a non-committal little chamber that had no particular purpose in the world. There were a few books in a hanging shelf on the walls; there was a tall mirror framed in coils of a heavy gilded design; and from a corner of the ceiling hung a little round bird-cage, empty these many years. For in the time of my mother, she had once loved this room, partly because it was small, I suppose, and as close an approach to snugness as any apartment in the château could suggest; besides, there were two great windows, standing side by side and looking to the south. Here she used to love to come with her sewing and sit in the flare of the sun while two little canaries in the cage whistled and throbbed with music or fluttered from perch to perch—glittering jewels of green and gold.

Afterward the room fell under a shadow for that gentle soul, and the shadow dropped over it

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on that day when Monsieur, striding into this very chamber, had cast me down at her feet and cried :

“You have given me a son like yourself! He is a fool and a coward—a coward and a fool—like you, Julie!”

This, then, was what sank into my mind, and as I dropped into a chair I felt as though Monsieur had grown into a vast giant so that the proportions between us were as in that other day when I had given him his first disgust for me.

I heard Monsieur whistling in the hall; then the distant voice of Mademoiselle Marcia stopping him, and both their voices more loud as she drew him into the other room.

This from Monsieur, his voice still very husky for the reason which I knew: “My dear Mademoiselle Gerardin, you look full of mischief. And are you?”

“I am full of news, however,” said she.

“Good news, then,” said he. “I can not imagine you in the rôle of the raven.”

“I think that you would detest the bearer of ill tidings.”

“Do you think so? Well, we all have our ec-

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centricities. But what is the news, by all means? And is it really bad?"

"I think it will hurt like a pinch of the very devil's fingers!"

What a way to break a tale to Monsieur; I was a-sweat with chill fear!

"I am prepared, Mademoiselle. I am braced against the shock."

"It begins with your secretary—that precious Lafitte."

"So? So?" said Monsieur, with just a trace of emotion in his voice. "He is a dark dog, is he not?"

"He is, he is!" exclaimed Aunt Marcia with the heartiest emphasis. "He decided to-day that he would leave—he would not even wait for your return."

"Is that all? Is that all? That is nothing. I have never liked his ways; it is an excellent rid-dance, after all."

"But before he left, he had to air his reasons."

"And to you?"

"No, not to me—to a more important person."

The voice of Monsieur, lifting from its usually

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well-trained note of politeness, rang through the room: "To Antoinette!"

"Yes," said Mademoiselle Gerardin.

Monsieur took a turn through the room; I could hear the crushing of his foot in the rug and the floor quivered a little beneath me.

"Very well," said he, pausing. "Now tell me about it. Tell me everything, if you please."

"I shall tell you everything so far as I know it. Jean had come into the library——"

"Ah, Jean was in it!"

How well I knew that purring note of collected wrath!

"Lafitte had wished to speak with him, and Jean came in while Lafitte was showing Antoinette some of your bindings."

"Continue, continue!"

"It came very briefly. Lafitte announced that he was leaving. Jean naturally expressed some wonder——"

"Why did he do that? Why not let the fool go and there an end of it? But pardon me. Continue again, if you please."

"In another instant, Lafitte was bursting out

with a thousand reasons for leaving the château, and among others he said that he was afraid to spend another night beneath the roof; and he added some odd insinuations—very odd, Monsieur!”

“Did Jean stand and allow the dog to say these things?”

“No, no! Jean tried to do what he could to stop him or to at least make him lower his voice, but when Lafitte saw that he was being controlled, he was seized with a spasm of conscience which seemed to tell him that he must make the entire world hear what he had to say! Oh, Monsieur, a great many crimes are performed in the name of religion!”

“Are there not? But all of this fascinates me. What did the rogue have to say?”

“Things which I know you can brush away in a moment. But he began with a great many insinuations, as I said before. And among other things he mentioned the fact that you had been married twice before——”

“So? Is that a novel bit of news?”

“And that both of your wives died young.”

“The rat—ah, Mademoiselle, the rat to make such an insinuation!”

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"That one son had committed suicide—I am sorry, but you must know exactly what came to the ear of Antoinette."

"I must indeed!" breathed Monsieur.

"And that another son was driven from your house——"

"Sacred devil!" groaned Monsieur. "Did not Jean close the dog's mouth then?"

"There were some more words—and then Jean struck this fellow to the floor."

"I thank God for it."

"But Lafitte is seriously injured!"

"Ah? I wish his neck had been broken!"

"You must understand, Monsieur, that Jean seized him as a cat seizes a rat—and Antoinette was a little frightened!"

"Do I understand you?" asked Monsieur in a sharply changed voice.

"I think that you do. It must have been a frightful thing to see. He almost killed Lafitte with a single blow of his hand. One of the servants, entering, cried out at the sight of Jean's face: 'The ghost of Monsieur!'"

"And Antoinette saw all of this?"

"She did. I have the story from her."

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"In all this detail?"

"And more."

"What effect does it have upon her?"

"An effect which will not please you, I am afraid."

"She is frightened?"

"Yes, and more than that. I—I am sorry to tell you, Monsieur, but she says that she feels we should leave the château to-morrow."

Monsieur began to pace up and down through the room again, and a shudder passed through me with the impact of every footfall.

"A delightful tangle! A delicious affair!" murmured he at last. "Where is Antoinette now?"

"In the room of Lafitte. She has been nursing him. The man was badly injured, Monsieur; though the doctor says that he will recover—but only with the most careful attention!"

"But tell me—did Jean allow her to go to that man?"

"She went of her own accord. He could not control her. She is very headstrong, Monsieur!"

"And Jean, Mademoiselle. Can you tell me where he is?"

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She raised her voice a little. "I don't know. In the library, I believe."

I did not want to hear any more, but using that hint, I fled to the library and had barely time to sit down and compose myself when Monsieur entered. He came over to me without speaking and stood over my chair smiling at me and combing his beard.

"Monsieur?" said I, when I could endure it no longer.

"I am about to find out whether or not you have ruined my life, Jean," said he.

"I wished to tell you, Monsieur," said I, rising, "that——"

"I have heard the entire story."

"If I displayed some savagery, Monsieur, remember that I was provoked."

"Jean, if you wished to strike, and strike for me, why did you not send a bullet through his heart when the cub first opened his lips about me? Now there is nothing left to me but this——"

He looked above him with a gesture.

"I must go to face her," said he, "and I had rather face a leveled row of guns. But in ten min-

utes, Jean, I shall know whether or not you are what I have always suspected—a fatal poison in my life!”

He turned his back on me and went to the door, but there he paused and cleared his throat a little. Once he opened the door and shut it again.

“You have seen her. Is she excited—or is she calm?”

“She is calm, Monsieur.”

“Ah, that is the worse—that is so much the worse!”

He made still another pause. This was the man of iron, and yet I promise you that he was trembling as at last he jerked the library door open and started out into the hall.

I listened to his steps for a moment. I was seized with such a chill that I stretched out my numbed hands to the fire and bathed them in the heat; for I knew perfectly well that upon the interview with Antoinette would depend the interview which was to come next—between my father and me!

XXX

I COULD not have remained quietly in that room while the talk between Monsieur and Antoinette was deciding whether or not my father was to meet me in tolerance or in a mortal passion which would bring to that sad house the most terrible of all the tragedies which had occurred within its walls. I could not have remained still and once I rose and began to move back and forth, it was impossible for me to do other than one thing. That was to start for the window of the room of Lafitte, where Antoinette now was—and to which Monsieur was going.

It was very dishonest; there is nothing more vile than the eavesdropper; and yet I did not even pause to consider on which side honor lay. I went to the second story as fast as I could and through my room to the balcony upon which my outer doors opened.

The May night was sharp, with the chill of a

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gathering mist in it which promised to give us rain before the morning. All the windows were clotted and clouded with it, and it pressed against my face like a wet icy hand: a grateful touch to me, for my head was bursting with blood. I hung on the railing of the balcony for a moment, with my head thrown back, letting the chill come against my beating throat as well. Only half the sky was darkened. The stars and a thin edge of moon floated in the other half with the billowing mist now and again washing half the stars from my sight and then, like the wave of a curtain, giving them back to me again.

Then I turned toward the wall of the house and the lighted windows of Lafitte's room just above the chamber of Monsieur. There the balcony ended and a heavy shaft of ornamental stone work descended like a support for the balcony from above. On the massive scroll-work of this shaft a child could have climbed with perfect safety, even on a dark wet night like this, so I worked my way in a trice up to the windows of Lafitte. With my feet firmly braced on the uppermost scroll of the stone I was in a position to keep my head between the two windows and in this manner I could peer in from

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time to time and also hear everything that was spoken, as long as it was in a voice loud enough to carry above the noise of the wind.

Monsieur was not yet there and rapidly as I had climbed I knew that he must have paused once or twice on the way up the stairs, in order to con his lines again before the critical moment. I can not tell you how much this meant to me—I who had seen him in terrible situations before this, but never in such a place that he was at a loss for a right word.

I did not hear the tap at the door, but I saw Antoinette lift her head, and I saw her face change. By that I knew that Monsieur had at last arrived. He came in at once, and I could not help a smile of admiration. He had so thoroughly mastered the tremendous passion of yearning and fear which I knew to be in him, that he was able to nod and smile at her in a brisk, almost impersonal fashion. At the same time, he went forward to the bed and looked down to Lafitte. A gesture sent the nurse from the room.

In all that followed, I saw Monsieur at his best, as you will agree.

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He considered Lafitte very seriously, at first; the poor secretary was now in a wretched condition, his head still bandaged, his eye sometimes closed and sometimes open, but never with a light of sense in it. He moved continually and needed close watching; the reason that Antoinette remained with him so much was that her voice had a quick influence over the delirious man whereas the other nurses often had to use force to control him.

"The doctor's report is a serious statement," said Monsieur.

"It is, François," said Antoinette.

"Ah! ah!" said Monsieur. "It is a very pleasant thing for me to hear you speak that name; particularly now!"

If he were calm—at least in his appearance—it was nothing compared with the perfect ease of Antoinette. She looked up to him as she said: "You have talked with Aunt Marcia, then?"

"I've just finished talking with her."

"Well," said Antoinette in her slow way, "I hope that I am not unfair, but I have been thoroughly frightened."

"I admit that it is an ugly mess throughout.

This Lafitte—ah, well, one can not hate such a fellow. I think he said no more than he honestly believed.”

She was watching Monsieur—not boldly, but with thought. I could see her reaching for the truth.

“I was frightened by a ghost,” said she, and she smiled a little crookedly at my father. “Jean is so delicately made, so gentle, that I have been half-pitying. But I saw a giant leap out of him; not just the strength but the passion, too. Yet what I thought of was not so much Jean as you. That leap of fire in him—well it seemed only like a shadow of what I might find in you. I tell you everything, you see. If this were a love-match, perhaps I’d like you all the better. But it isn’t, you know——”

Here her voice trailed away—because Monsieur, for the first time in his life, could not control himself; agony and grief were in his white face.

“And there have been black stories circulating about me,” he suggested.

“Yes, I have heard a great deal. And I think that I had better go back home with Aunt Marcia.”

I waited for Monsieur to speak. He said no word.

"It is not that I have closed my mind to what you may have to say," said she. "I am only wretched because I have had such a panic. If you wish to explain——"

"You are marvelously honest and fair, Antoinette," said he. "But I don't think that I shall try to defend myself. Well, my dear, perhaps Lafitte is right in spirit even if he is wrong in facts. He accused me—of what? Of murdering one son and driving another from the château; of destroying two wives because—who knows why?"

"Monsieur, I never could have entertained such suspicions of you. No, never, of course."

"I know that you could not. But you gave your ear to the thing behind his words. And in that I admit that you are right. Indeed, I hesitate to review a great deal of my life even with my own eyes."

"Do you, truly?" said she, wondering.

"There are periods—years at a time," said Monsieur calmly, "which I like to keep buried in my memory. They are black times, you may be

sure! But after all, it would have been very difficult to season my nature with much of the saint—very difficult, Antoinette! If I were now what I was two, or three years ago, I should never have been able to come to you so calmly. I could not sit still and acquiesce in such a loss; I would have been like a wild devil in the château, I assure you. In fact, my dear, I am astonished at my mildness at this moment!”

She, of course, could never read signs which she had not seen before, but I, who was familiar with every possible expression of Monsieur, knew by a spasmodic opening and closing of his hands that half of hell was boiling in him. Yet he could speak of his mildness, and with an apparent truth. How great a man was Monsieur!

“And I am surprised, also,” said she.

“But I have had a great lesson,” said Monsieur. “My last outbreak of temper sent my dear Jean flying away from the château and there was a time during which I feared that I had lost him forever; but at last I won him back to me. However, there was a fright which has helped me to school my bad temper!”

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Antoinette watched him with the most eager interest. By making a few adroit admissions, he seemed to nullify the force of all the rest of the accusations of Lafitte, either explicit or implied. By freely accepting a partial blame, he seemed to make the importance of his sins evaporate. I have seen other men do cleverly diplomatic things, but I have never watched a negotiator half so effective as Monsieur.

"If I return to Gerardin——" she began.

"I shall start with Jean for a little jaunt around the world. That is all. In a few years I suppose that I shall be as much recovered as most from heart-break. You see that I do not sham, Antoinette! I do not think that many men have the power in their dull souls to love any woman as I love you; but it will not kill me if I lose you."

Suddenly she began to smile at him. "I like everything you have said," said she.

"Thank you," said he; the crisis had come.

She dropped her head a little and pondered.

"I do think that you are fond of me, François. And I dread making any quick decision. May I take another day?"

She was not watching him at that instant, so

that he allowed some of his joy to spring into his eye, and it was a ragged lightning flash. I did not wait to hear more of that interview, but I climbed down as I had come, as secretly as possible, and regained my room. I must prepare for the falling of a blow, because it was due to me that Lafitte had burst into such full cry.

I was about as thoroughly unnerved as I had ever been in my life, but in the family of Limousin one learned to control such emotions. Let me say that Monsieur appeared at the dinner table more suave than ever, and his astonishing candor surpassed all else. It seemed impossible that one could go so far as he did.

He said openly: "Jean, you are to understand—it may keep you from embarrassment—that Antoinette and I are in a state of suspense and our engagement discontinues."

After which he went on with the ordinary current of small talks; and I could not help feeling that he had benefited himself again in the eyes of Antoinette. Keen as she was, even she could not be expected to look through this mask of blunt apparent honesty to the keener evil behind it. We detect the ordinary villain; but Iago escapes.

XXXI

THE first thing in the morning, of course, I went to see my victim, and I found Lafitte weak, pale, but conscious. His wits had come back to him, and the effects of the blow promised to do no more than keep him in bed for a few more days. He was so swollen and poisoned with malice that when I spoke to him, he would not answer for some time; at length this muscular Christian said: "It was a trick, Monsieur Jean. Otherwise I should have been able to block that punch!"

Considering all that that blow had meant, I was a little shocked and a great deal amused by this speech. However, to find him so much recovered was a huge relief and I should have endured a great deal more from him without attempting any argument. I could not help going to the window and looking at the place where I had played the part of eavesdropper so shamelessly the night before. I saw a typical morning of the late spring. There

was a low-lying mist, not sufficient wholly to shut away the sun, but transparent and luminous with light which struck through and made the forest and all its new yellow-green leaves glisten; except in the distance, where the fog was pooled through the woods like thick white smoke. It was such a day as makes one eager to be out in the open; certainly I could not have guessed by the face of that morning that the blackest of all the dark chapters in the history of the château was about to be written.

When I left Lafitte I met Antoinette in the hallway, coming to see her patient—coming, as it seemed to me, with all the beauty of that morning like rose and dew upon her face. It was the first time I had been alone with her since that fateful afternoon of the day before, and I paused to try to find some words for a miserable apology. But then I saw, with bewilderment, that she was as much frightened as I.

I do not feel that I have given you a living picture of Antoinette, but perhaps you have guessed that she had seemed to me second in strength and courage to Monsieur alone—yes, able to meet even him upon equal terms. And therefore when I saw

her color change and her eyes widen a little I was amazed. But I said:

"Antoinette, I know that you despise me, but will you try to forgive me for yesterday? Will you call it madness and try to forget it?"

She did not meet my eyes. She looked down to the hall floor, saying: "I shall think of it as you wish me to, Jean."

I went from her feeling more than ever like a guilty dog, full of sorrow, and yet full of excitement, too—I could not tell why! In the lower hall, I had that meeting with Monsieur which I had been dreading. He chose to say nothing, but looked me over with his brilliant eye while I saw the scorn and the dislike and the reproaches shadow his face in turn.

He merely said contemptuously, at last: "Mademoiselle Marcia has gone out for a walk in the woods. I think you had better follow her and offer her your company. Remember that you can help to undo the pretty work which you have done!"

"But, Monsieur," cried I, "is not Mademoiselle Marcia your ally?"

"Stuff!" said Monsieur. "Do you believe the

words she speaks? She is the soul and incarnation of suspicion! She is more filled with the devil than a cup can be filled with poison!"

I went to find Marcia. She was a brisk walker when she chose to be. The direction she had taken was pointed out to me, but though I stepped on briskly for a good half-hour, I did not come on any trace of her. I started back more slowly, convinced that she could not have gone so far, and weaving more deliberately from side to side—from one path to another path. It was well over an hour after I left the house before I caught a glimpse of her, not on any of the roads or paths, but on a hillside down which the breeze was sweeping bright ghosts of mist. She was not alone but was talking with a tall shadow of a man: Reynal.

To be sure my father had not yet sent out an alarm for him, or asked the police to help run him down, and yet it was incredible that Reynal had actually dared to remain on the grounds of the château.

I hurried forward. What he could be saying to her, I dared not so much as try to guess. I lost sight of them as I descended into the hollow; and

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when I came up the hill beyond I found Marcia, alone, coming down. Reynal, of course, had disappeared. That extra sense which he possessed must have warned him of my approach.

My good-natured Mademoiselle Marcia passed me like a cloud without a word of greeting; when I came up to her side she gave me one eloquent look and with: "If you please, Monsieur!" she banished me from her.

She went straight back to the house with me trailing, but when she came to the château, she paused and let me come up with her.

"Will you ask Antoinette to come out to me here?" said she coldly.

I could only bow to her and hurry in. What should I do? I rushed to Monsieur.

"She has seen Reynal; I found them talking; Reynal disappeared before I came up, and Mademoiselle went by me with a face like thunder; she is outside the château, now, and asks me to send Antoinette to her!"

Monsieur, while I burst out in this fashion went on with the task of taking out a cigarette, rolling it to the proper softness—because he liked a cigar-

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ette which burned freely—and then lighted it and blew out a blue-brown wisp of smoke as I ended.

He merely said: "If you had come up with Reynal, what would you have done?"

"I am armed, Monsieur," said I. "I should have killed him as I would kill a wolf!"

"My brave little Jean," said Monsieur, half contemptuous and half surprised. "Would you do so much? Let me tell you this—he would not lift a hand to keep you from sending a bullet through his heart! Does not that surprise you?"

I could do nothing but gape at him.

"But now, Monsieur, what shall I do?"

"Find Antoinette, of course, as you were told to do, and escort her out to Mademoiselle Marcia."

I did as he bade me do. What was the right or the wrong thing to do, I could hardly tell; but I felt for some odd reason that in this whirl of entangling rights and duties the simplest thing for me to attempt was to work for the right of Monsieur.

Antoinette was curled up in a chair in the library with a great book of old maps in her lap, and her ankles gathered in one slender hand.

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"I am marking out the district of Limousin," said she, and smiled up at me. I could not endure her smile. It made me weak with miserable happiness.

I told her that her aunt wished to see her and that she was outside the château.

"It is something serious then?"

"Alas, Antoinette," I could not help exclaiming, "is there anything but seriousness in this sad house of ours?"

I tried to escort her but she said that she would go alone, and I watched her stepping lightly down the hall. I turned around to find the somber form of Monsieur just behind me.

"I should think, Jean," said he, "that she would make even a cold heart like yours leap. I should think that she would make even a timid nature such as yours thunder and rage like white waters."

He had his glance fixed upon the bend of the hall around which she had just disappeared.

"I do not speak of her brave calm soul," said he. "I do not speak of her wise and understanding mind. Such things are delights for old men like François Limousin. But consider only the beauty

of her face, because even a child will love a charming face; or consider the exquisite workmanship which has been lavished upon her body."

Here he combed his glossy curling beard and allowed the devil in him to smile upon me.

"But to a child like you these things remain mysteries, I presume. Learn from me, Jean, that the whole woman is revealed in her hand; and how curved, how taper and delicate is the hand of Antoinette! But even granting that you are nearly blind to such perfections, still there remains a fragrance of beauty which I should think in spite of closed eyes would steal upon the brain and fill you with an ecstasy. Yet there is not even a tinge of color in your face as I speak of her!"

I can not guess why he should have chosen to torment and insult me at this moment of all moments in his life; unless it were, perhaps, that he had a suspicion even then of the truth. However, he immediately added:

"The time has now come when my fate may rest in your hands. How much Reynal has said to Marcia I can only guess. For no one can know what is in the mind of a saint; even *I* can not guess

it! Very well, Jean, you may presume as I do that a great deal will bear upon my treatment of you and of—Julie! And it may be that a few words from you might balance against all that Reynal has said. I can not force you to speak these few words. But I put myself in your hands. I put the happiness of your father in your hand. For God's sake, do what you can for me—in charity!"

"Did you call him a saint?" said I. "But saint or not, can you tell me why Reynal tried to murder you in your room; why he suddenly transfers his hate from me to you?"

"Hate?" said my father. "Do you think he ever hated you? But I shall tell you everything and put myself in your hands. He would have murdered me to keep me from this marriage. Because of your mother, Jean! Now I have told you everything!"

"My mother?"

"Christ, boy, are you blind? Do you think such a man as Reynal becomes a horse groom for the love of horses?"

No doubt this should have made the matter clear enough, but it was not enough for me, though it sufficed Monsieur. He left me at once, and I saw

him stride down the hall with his head bowed a little as he passed into the library; in that moment I was prepared to die for him!

Do you not wonder as I did, at the ease with which he had passed from the character of Monsieur—terrible, cynical, contemptuous—to the character of my father?

I had scarcely a chance to control the great swelling of my heart which was filled with pity and a will to serve him when Marcia and Antoinette came into the house and found me.

XXXII

MADEMOISELLE MARCIA, with a single word, gathered me into their party and conducted us, by an unlucky chance, into that same little chamber where the empty canary cage of my mother still hung. I could see that there was trouble ahead; it was darkly written upon the face of Aunt Marcia. Antoinette was still protesting that this was a clumsy, embarrassing procedure.

"Embarrassing?" said Aunt Marcia. "It is!"

She turned a gloomy eye upon me.

"Young man," she said, "you saw that I was talking with Pierre Reynal."

"I did," I confessed.

"He has told me everything that you know he can tell about Limousin, but when I repeated it to Antoinette she refused to leave the château. Merciful heavens, Tony, what is in your mind?"

Antoinette said nothing. She sat by the window with her head turned a little away as though she

were more interested in the loveliness of the day outside than in what she might learn from me.

"You see?" said Mademoiselle Marcia to me. "She acts like that. I don't recognize her. How in the name of all that is wonderful and damnable has Monsieur been able to do this? Jean Limousin, are you willing to answer some of my questions truthfully?"

I bowed to her. I was a very sick young man.

"Tell me first, then, if it is not true that Monsieur has been a devil to you?"

I turned that blunt question back and forth in my mind. "He is my father," said I.

"Stuff!" said she. "Did you not run away from his house?"

I looked appealingly at her, and it was like looking into the eyes of a man.

"I had provoked him," said I.

"Had he not provoked you?" said this terrible woman.

"It is true!" I was forced to whisper.

"Will you look at Jean?" cried Marcia.

"Yes," said Antoinette, but she stared down as though she feared to lift her eyes to mine!

"Will you consider, Tony, that there was never a gentler soul in the world than that of this poor boy?"

"I do consider it," said a faint voice.

"And yet he was ordered from his father's house—because the foolish child had been tempted to play cards—and had lost a few dollars! Do you hear me, Tony?"

"I do!"

"Is there no sense of pity in you?"

"Oh yes, Aunt Marcia!"

"But that is not all! Is it not true—answer me, Jean Limousin, as you hope for Heaven!—that when Monsieur was denouncing you, your poor young mother ran in between you and begged him——"

It lifted me from my chair, to the back of which I clung, wavering.

"Mademoiselle!" I gasped at her.

"Ah, I am sorry, Jean—but to open the eye of this poor child—is it not true that he brushed her brutally aside, and that she fell to the floor——"

I covered my eyes.

But ah, the golden voice of Antoinette! "Aunt

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Marcia, I am leaving the room. It is too terrible and cruel!"

"I want the truth and you must have it! Then tell me, Jean Limousin——"

"I shall not hear another word."

She tried to run from the room, but Mademoiselle Marcia caught her with a thick arm and held her.

"Answer me, miserable boy! Oh, look, Tony, and see the guilt in his face even if you will not listen to his voice!"

I said in a voice so hoarse that I had to try twice before I could make myself heard: "It is less than the truth."

There was a moan from Antoinette, and she dropped her head on the shoulder of Aunt Marcia.

All the regard of Marcia was for her niece, however. I, having delivered my testimony, could be dismissed.

"Do you hear, Tony? Do you hear what Jean has told us?"

She only murmured: "Let me go, Aunt Marcia! I shall die if you keep me here——"

"Will you face Jean and——"

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To my astonishment, to the very visible horror of Mademoiselle Marcia, Antoinette burst into tears.

"The world is ending!" cried Marcia with a startled look.

And she led her niece from the room.

There was an interval after this, but I had not yet gathered enough strength to leave that torture-chamber when Monsieur came in to me. He gave me a single look and then snarled: "You have talked, baby!"

I tried to meet his eye, but the coward was very strong in me on this day.

"How blessed I am in such a son!" said Monsieur.

If he had stirred a step toward me, I should have flung myself through the plate glass of the big window; I would have leaped a cliff to avoid him.

He saw it at once and merely sneered at me.

"I am not going to put a hand on you," said he. "For such things as this physical punishment is nothing—nothing. But there are other ways of which you will learn. You are not the son of a fool,

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my dear Jean! You are not the son of a fool. Of that you may be sure!"

He was about to say more and find some vent to his agony through his demoniacal tongue when the door was cast open by Mademoiselle Marcia. She was as full of fire as Monsieur himself, raging inwardly.

She said: "I announce your victory, Monsieur. I have done my best. But with her eyes opened to the truth, she will not see the light."

The voice of Monsieur was like a shout of victory.

"By all that is noble in Heaven!" cried she. "She still will not leave the château!"

Words formed upon the lips of Marcia, but though there was a great deal of impulsive savage in her, there was a great deal of lady, also. Finally she turned her back and left the room.

We could follow her heavy step as she went through the hall and then up the stairs. Monsieur, after this bewildering revelation, was a changed man. He was able to sit down and light a cigarette, saying: "I could not have guessed it. Frankly, I could not have guessed it. But I should have known

that to a nature as proud and as strong as hers, only what comes into her own life affects her will. If she has decided to marry me, what would the revelations of creatures like Reynal and Jean Limousin mean to her? Nothing! She is a goddess, and she must know the gap that extends between her and other women. Yet it is very wonderful! As for love—no, I can not delude myself. It is only esteem. Not for my wealth. She is above that. It is esteem for the mind of Monsieur. Oh, strange and wise and beautiful girl!”

“I retract some of what I have spoken to you, Jean. Perhaps it was better that she should have known everything before the marriage. I have sailed my ship between the reefs; there is a fair harbor before me now!”

XXXIII

I LEFT the château with the ugly knowledge that I was the most despicable creature in the world, and I hurried out where I could at least be away from the contempt of other men. I did not care what path I took so long as it led me away. I stumbled on blindly until a shadow glided out of the wood before me. It was Pierre Reynal! You, who know Monsieur as I have showed him to you, will understand why it was that I gaped at the man who dared to linger under the very shadow of my father's hand.

He was more repulsive in appearance than ever, for under a beard of four or five days, his ugly face was blotched and swollen where the blows of Monsieur had fallen during their murderous battle. But though he was leaning on a long rifle, I did not make the least gesture toward my own weapon. If it were true that this Reynal had been my very vindictive enemy during most of my life, and that he had attempted to kill my father not long before, still

what can one do to a man who will not strike back? And I had learned from experience that this brave and terrible man would not lift his hand against me. I regarded him, therefore, with only a little more than my usual interest and loathing. Some people have such feelings of revulsion when they see a spider, or a crawling snake; it was in this manner that I regarded Reynal. I never could keep my emotion behind a mask.

"You are as happy as ever to see me, Monsieur Jean," said Reynal.

"I can not see you," I answered him sternly, "without feeling that it is my duty to shoot you down, or call for others to help me."

"Your duty to whom, Monsieur?"

"For one, to my father whom you have tried to murder, Reynal!"

"But is it murder to stand before a man and to fight with your two hands——"

"I shall not argue. Only Reynal, if you love your life, do not remain in the grounds of the château; for Monsieur has sent out a dozen men to hunt through the woods for you. And if they find you, they are instructed to say that they mistook you for a rabbit——"

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Reynal favored me with his frightful smile.

"You are too kind, Monsieur Jean," said he.

"You knew it all before," said I, understanding him at once. "You seem to have your informants; and tell me—did you expect me on this path?"

"I saw you coming and merely waited."

"Reynal, I can not help warning you. In spite of all my reasons for hating you, I have a kindly feeling toward you; I wish you no harm."

Reynal seemed moved by this, and he even made a step or two toward me, saying: "Monsieur Jean, is it true? Is there one touch of fondness in you for Pierre Reynal?"

I said coldly: "I said that I did not hate you, Reynal, and I have no wish to see you lose your life—which you will surely do if you remain near Monsieur!"

"It is true," said he, standing again. "In fact, this is the last day."

"You are leaving the place, then?"

"I am leaving," said he, with his ugly smile. "I shall not see you again," he added in a singular voice; "although you may see Pierre Reynal."

"Now what do you mean by that?" I asked him.

"Forgive me for such a riddle," said he. "But

we have not a great deal of time. The reason that I waited for you here is that there is a thing which I must tell you."

"What is that, then?" I asked, very curious indeed.

"It is the reason why Mademoiselle Antoinette Gerardin is remaining at the château," said he.

"And you can tell me that? However, I know it well enough!"

"If you know," frowned Reynal, "why are you here? But you do not know, and I shall tell you. You dream that it is because the strength and the strangeness of Monsieur has surrounded her. Ah, how blind you are, Jean! She remains to-day and to-morrow and perhaps even more days, almost to the very moment which Monsieur has appointed for the marriage, and it is because she has no power to take herself away from the man she loves. What a love it is, that keeps her chained here, although she dreads and loathes Monsieur!"

Now I leaped, with a great blind flight of the spirit, on his meaning.

"Reynal, Reynal, you could not know? There is no way in which you could know such a thing."

"Is there not?" said he. "Nevertheless I have a perfect knowledge of it. It is you whom she loves. She waits for you. She has been in your arms; do you think that she can be, ever, in the arms of any other man? Go back to her. Go quickly—only, beware of Monsieur! Beware of Monsieur!"

I struggled for an instant to understand how it could be; but then I felt that I must not try to reason it out, but do blindly what Reynal had directed, as though he were a prophet sent to me from Heaven. I did not pause to thank him, but I turned and rushed back.

Good fortune favored me. As I hurried through the garden, there I found Antoinette dressed in a great stiff apron, with gloves and a pair of shears cutting long-stemmed roses. And suddenly I thanked God that I found her dressed in this fashion, so busy, and so plain, like any gardener's wife; for it would be easier to talk with her. We were private, for the overgrown hedge which bounded this little square of garden shut it off from all of the château except the windows of a tall gable where was that long unused room of Hubert Guillaume.

"The garden is going frightfully to pot," said

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Antoinette. I looked from the roses to her face and back. Then I said: "Antoinette, I must talk to you a little."

She leaned hurriedly above the flowers.

"What do you wish to say, Jean?"

"I wish to say—I wish to say—do you not despise me for the manner in which I took advantage of you yesterday?"

"No," said she.

"I can't talk to you, unless I can see your face."

"Of course," said she in a rather stifled voice, and began to rise.

But in some manner the roses slipped from her arm and tumbled to the ground. I dropped on my knees to pick them up; but I reached only blindly for them for the face of Antoinette was scant inches from mine and I could not help seeing that she was a sweeter color than the flowers themselves.

"Antoinette—" said I, trembling.

"Yes," said she.

"It was not madness that made me—I mean, it was the truth, yesterday."

Said she, rising in great haste: "I must go back to the house; I have forgotten——"

I stepped before her, trampling the roses.

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"You must not stop me."

"Only to tell you one thing." I had one frightened flash of her eyes.

"Antoinette," cried I, "I love you!"

"Do not touch me, Jean!" said she. "The house—if Monsieur——"

"Do I care if the whole world should see?"

"Do not touch me—come no closer and I shall tell you everything—but don't touch me—let no one see!"

"Tell me, then!"

"You will promise? You will not come near me?"

"On my soul!"

"Then—oh, from the first day, I knew! From the first moment that you came to me I knew that I loved you. Do not touch me."

"I only wish to fall on my knees before you; to tell you how I worship you, my beautiful Antoinette!"

"Do not stop me. I must pass. Do not touch me or I shall be in your arms telling you——"

"There is no one; no one can see us."

"I can not tell, because there is a mist over my eyes. I see you only."

“Antoinette——”

“I am afraid! Oh, Jean, be patient and you shall have me forever as your wife. But now——”

Now, twice I had taken hold upon myself and drawn myself back, and twice this rosy trembling beauty called me closer; she was half in fear and half in smiles, and with every instant her dark eyes which looked every way except into mine were more filled with magic. So, against all the power of my will, I held out my arms to her and she, with a little moan, stepped within them.

Then the lips of Antoinette were saying against my lips: “Am I to die, Jean? I am too happy to live. And—ah, it is he!”

When I turned, I looked to the tall gables of the room of my brother and there, somewhat dim behind the glass, like an image in water, I saw Monsieur. Then he stepped back into the shadow.

Antoinette and I stared for one frightful instant at each other, too stricken with fear, too weak to move. Then she turned with me and we fled through the garden and beyond toward the woods.

“The river—and the canoe,” said I.

I dropped back a half pace behind her. She had

torn off that clumsy gardener's apron, and the big hat, and the heavy gloves; she ran like a boy, with the very wind in her feet.

We flashed down the curve of the broad path which wound into the woods toward the river, leaving the grave of Hubert Guillaume at our right, and then through that cleft in the trees which Monsieur had opened to give the grave a prospect of the river which Hubert had loved so well. We turned from that to a narrower bridle path, and we were already well down it when I heard the hoofs of a horse flying behind us. Antoinette cast one glance of agony toward me and gave her last strength to her running; but I saw instantly that all would not do. I took her arm and stopped her.

"We can never reach the water in time," said I.

"Then the trees, Jean——"

"He would hunt us down in five minutes. No, he must meet me here. But go into the woods, Antoinette; hurry up to the house; I shall stay here and try to persuade him to be reasonable."

She made a first step to obey me and then whirled back.

"You are not armed, Jean?"

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"I am not," said I firmly. "There is no danger."

"There *is* danger. You shall not stay."

She had thrown an arm around me to draw me toward the sheltering trees and as she did so by an unlucky chance her hand touched the revolver beneath my coat; it was in her hand instantly.

"You did not mean it!" cried poor Antoinette.

But I was possessed, then, of the devil which lived in the blood of Monsieur himself. I tore the gun from her fingers.

"Go to the house, Antoinette," I commanded her in a terrible voice. "Find whatever men you can at the château and bring them here. They may not come too late!"

"Give me the gun, Jean!"

"If there is blood, it is on his head. Go back, Antoinette."

Here Monsieur broke into our view as he swung his horse from the river road and rushed down the path.

XXXIV

HE HAD not paused even to buckle a gun about his hips, but he carried the naked weapon in one hand while he gathered the reins in the other. His head was bare, with the long hair whipping back and his beard parted by the wind of his gallop. To me, standing on lower ground, he looked like a giant, but calmness spread through my heart. His own blood was rising in me, as I held the revolver ready, and brushed Antoinette away a second time.

It seemed that God would not give to the earth so terrible a crime, for out from the trees before Monsieur stepped Pierre Reynal with one hand raised to warn back my father and a long rifle in the other. My father did not even draw rein, but shot Reynal down and fired again into his body as he rushed past and on toward me.

Afterward, when the wounds were seen, no one could tell how enough life had remained in Reynal to permit him to do the thing. I saw him twist upon

his side and level the rifle. His bullet struck Monsieur fairly in the back and the big man cast up his arms and swayed from the saddle. He rolled to my feet in a cloud of dust and flying gravel, and lay on his face with a great red stain growing on the back of his coat.

When I turned him on his back again I thought for an instant from his open fixed eye that he was already dead, but he said at once in a wonderfully natural voice :

“It was Reynal, was it not?”

“It was Reynal,” said I.

“There are nine lives in that cat, then,” said Monsieur.

I was working with stumbling hands to cut away his coat.

“Do not trouble yourself,” said Monsieur. “I am a dead man. But put me on the grass. I have a foolish aversion from dying like a dog in the dirt.”

I did not need to tell Antoinette what to do. She had caught that plunging horse already and dragged herself into the saddle and flown up the road for help. As for Monsieur, he was miraculous.

“Have a look at Reynal,” said he. “The hero

should not be allowed to die without a hand to close his eyes; your hand above all."

I reached Reynal in three bounds; but he was dead long before; either of the bullets of Monsieur would have ended him. I merely paused to lift him from the road and cover his face; then I hurried back to my father.

It did not seem possible that he was dying; the bank to which I had moved him sloped sharply, so that he might have been thought reclining for a moment to enjoy the strangeness and the beauty of the sky. For the mist of the morning had not cleared away, but drawing thicker and thicker, it was now a sheet of luminous milk-white, and every green tree stood against this background in unearthly beauty. Even the Limousin River flowed pale between its banks.

He had lighted a cigarette when I reached him again; though I think that this was rather in bravado for by the tremor of his hand I guessed that every movement of his arm was a mortal agony to him. I begged him to lie quietly and to allow me to attempt to bandage the wound and stop the flow of death. He merely smiled at me.

"You talk, my boy," said he, "as though I had made a will and as though there were still time for me to change it. But you need have no fears. I have no will; the estate passes to you freely. Do not spend it too fast, Jean. Let it linger out a few years."

"Monsieur," said I, "God witness me when I swear that I wish to receive your commands."

He grunted at this, and then smiled at me his old smile which had chilled my blood so many times in the years before.

"An obedient son, now," said Monsieur. "A moment ago when you stood there waiting for me with a gun in your hand, I could have sworn that the Limousin blood flowed in you, after all. But now will you show weakness? No, Jean, be bold; talk frankly, because I love frank strength and have always loved it; it will amuse me to hear you tell me now how you hate me."

"Monsieur," said I, "believe that I have forgotten everything except that you are my father; and believe that there was never a time when I could not have loved you if you would have had it so."

"Tush," said he. "Even after Julie?"

I shuddered.

"Even after that," said I. "Compose yourself, and do not waste your strength talking. There will be a doctor in a few moments; something still can be done. I am sure of it!"

"I detest arguments," said Monsieur. "Let me tell you finally that the ice of death is in me; my body is already dying; my brain will follow soon after. Look at Reynal, though, with his face covered! Well, it is an infinite consolation to know that while he lies there rotting I am enjoying the tender green of these trees—and your conversation, my dear Jean."

Once more he smiled on me in his terrible way. It was impossible even then to pity him as much as I feared him.

"Is it not a strange day, Jean? And is it not fitting that such a life as mine should close with such a scene? On a miraculous day, and by the hand of my son!"

"Not mine!" cried I.

"Don't quibble," said Monsieur. "The hand of Reynal was your hand. He struck for your sake."

"No, no!" cried I. "I have no part in it! Do

not say it, Monsieur, or I shall be haunted the rest of my life!"

He looked at me for a moment, thoughtfully.

"That is the voice of Julie," said he. "And I swear that I believe you will grieve for me after I am dead, just as she loved me when I was living. Well, I was a mystery to her, poor child, but she was a greater mystery to me. But think of Reynal; raise him a monument higher than these trees. He saved you, my gentle Jean; for I would surely have laid you where I am now lying. Even if the jury bribes had cost me half of my estate! For when I saw you—damnation, I can not think of it! That she should have looked from me down to you! No more of that—we return to Reynal."

"I could never understand him," said I. "Why he should have tormented me, striven to ruin me with you—and then——"

"And become your slave the moment you left me? Shall I leave you your little mystery in order that it may dignify your entire life? No, I shall tell you the truth, which is not so marvelous. Well, Jean, when your mother and I were touring in Europe, a certain young strange Frenchman who

was about to take holy orders saw your mother. He gave up the divine calling to follow her divine face. That was Pierre Reynal!"

"Impossible!" cried I. "My mother never knew it!"

"Ah, but she did—or guessed it. Even Julie was not such a fool. Very well, Jean. He knew that he could not have her; he decided that he would take the creature which looked most like her—you, my dear boy. There is still a bit of Julie about your face. And the scheme of that madman, that odd Reynal, was simply to disgrace you in my eyes so that you would be forced into the world, where he would make himself necessary to you, and become like your father—like your slave—I think he hardly cared which!"

Monsieur laughed, softly, because of the torment which it caused him.

"Very delightful that his ugliness should have driven you almost mad in your childhood! An exquisite irony of fate."

He made a sharp pause and closed his eyes; his color had become livid; then settled to a deadly gray.

"It is nearly the end," said Monsieur. "I shall

not open my eyes again except to behold her for the last time; if Antoinette comes again—speak to me—but otherwise let me die in peace!”

Now, what the doctors will say, I do not know, but my own conviction is that my father would have died at that instant except that, by a giant use of his will, he drove death back from him. I saw the sweat rolling on his face, and outjetting of his jaw muscles.

He opened his lips to say only one thing: “Faster!” And that was when the beat of the hoofs of horses and the rolling of wheels was heard by us from the upper path. Antoinette flew in the lead on Monsieur’s tall horse; behind her came a carriage with half a dozen men jumbled in it. But Antoinette herself was first and as she slid into my arms and the horse trotted off I said—“Go to him.”

She went at once and kneeled beside him.

“Monsieur!” said she. If I had never guessed that the soul of Antoinette was the purest gold, I should have known it then as I heard the fear, the hatred, the horror banished from her throat, and nothing but the music of tender pity coming to the ears of that dying man.

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He looked up at her with eyes wonderfully bright. And he smiled his delight.

"Ah, Antoinette—my beautiful!" said he. "How delightful—how delightful you are! I fill my eyes with you, and so I am sure that I take you with me into eternity—and hell!"

All the life that was in him he had saved for that sight of her and for that speech. With the last word the life ran out from that great body and he was dead without a struggle, without the lifting of a hand, with the smile still on his lips.

This, therefore, must be the end. I had thought to tell of many other things, but now that I write of how the breath left the lips of Monsieur, I see that nothing remains of great importance which you should know; except how we opened the grave of Hubert Guillaume and stretched the body of Monsieur beside that of his son. Through my window at this moment I can see the maple leaves sprouting in a delicate mist of rose above the tomb.

I must speak of Reynal, but only to say that he lies in the little church in the village of Limousin. We placed him where the chanted masses would roll

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over his grave on every day of the year, because, as we felt then, and as I know now by the sad wisdom which long years give to us, he was a holy man. To-morrow the carriage will roll to the front of the château and I shall go in it to Limousin, and enter the church, and sit there. Hardly a fortnight passes that I do not go. I can only sit there and think until my heart swells too much and I must hurry out under the kind sky.

Last of all, of my sweet Antoinette, my dear, my dear wife—but no, I shall not write of this, because I have put down too many words of sorrow and here I must say farewell.

THE END

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